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ISSUE 206

It's my sad duty to let you know that what you're holding in your hands is the final edition of **games™**. After 16 years, 206 issues, and countless reviews, interviews, features and retrospectives we must unfortunately say goodbye.

I can understand if that's something of a disappointment to you, especially if you've been a long and loyal reader of this magazine over those years. Your support, feedback and commitment to us have been incredible, and all of us on the team will be forever grateful for it.

Endings are inherently a sad thing, but I always try to swing around to the good part if I can, and when something ends it not only opens up opportunities for new things, but offers us an amazing opportunity to reflect on things achieved and successes celebrated. That something must ultimately end does give it value, and I hope that you will be able to look back, as I do, on our great interviews over the years, our studio access, criticism and so much more with a fondness and appreciation for what they were and represented.

I hope that along the way we have entertained, informed and surprised you. I hope your game collections have expanded thanks to us. I hope your understanding of how games are made has improved because of us. I hope that your appreciation for the history of gaming has grown from joining us each issue.

I'm proud to say that **games™** leaves as it entered; fiercely independent, unrepentant, forthright, unwavering, driven, curious, passionate and, above all else, made by a small team of gamers who love that they get to do this for a living.

Thanks for picking up this final issue. I hope you enjoy it.



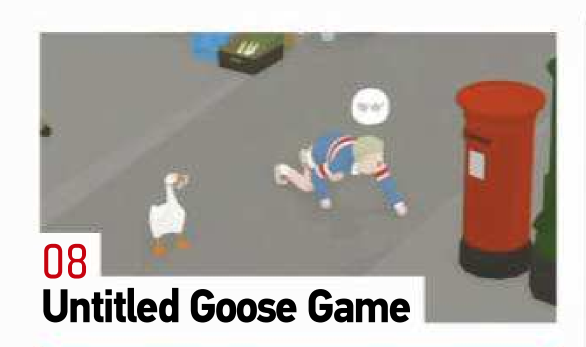
Jon Gordon

Jonathan Gordon
EDITOR


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RAGE 2
We get in close to experience the full bombast and bravado of this stunning new apocalyptic shooter



"WE WANTED TO MAKE OUR LITTLE MARIO 64 WHERE YOU'RE JUST A CHARACTER WHO RUNS AROUND"

WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO MAKE UNTITLED GOOSE GAME?

→ DEVELOPER HOUSE HOUSE SITS DOWN TO DISCUSS ITS JOURNEY TO 2019'S ODDEST STEALTH ACTION EXPERIENCE

FORMAT: **SWITCH, PC** | PUBLISHER: **PANIC**
DEVELOPER: **HOUSE HOUSE** | RELEASE: **TBC 2019**
PLAYERS: **1**

It's amazing what can happen when a small group of passionate people get together and put their collective minds and talents together to achieve something. The story of House House, a small developer based in Melbourne, Australia, is a great example of how that spirit can grow into something that captures the imagination of the gaming world, in this instance with its second release, *Untitled Goose Game*.

"We were people who kept ending up in a conversation when a larger event was going on," explains House House's Nico Disseldorp. "There would be 20 people, but by the end of the night it would be the four of us sitting around and talking about videogames." With Disseldorp's experience of web programming and Michael McMaster's 3D modelling experience, the group's conversations began to turn to making a game like the one's they had started playing together in-between these larger meet-ups.

"We spent the year leading up to that [decision] by meeting up once a week and playing a load of multiplayer games together," says Jake Strasser. "It was the big resurgence of multiplayer games at that time with *Sportsfriends* and *Towerfall* and *Samurai Gunn* were the big ones on rotation for us. It felt like a fairly achievable size to attempt as a first time game as well."

The result was *Push Me Pull You*, a kind of sumo-inspired ball game with worm-like conjoined characters, somewhat reminiscent of *Noby Noby Boy*, only in 2D. The team's expectations were humble enough, that at worst they would have a game they could enjoy together and at best some more friends might check it out, but it actually got picked up

for the PS4 and made some noise. "I think with the *Goose Game*, we probably always imagined this was more of a console game sort of thing," says Disseldorp. "We wanted to make our little Mario 64 where you're just a character who runs around."

This was a big step up, but having learnt how to program in Unity having moved from JavaScript during the development of *Push Me Pull You*, the challenge to make its first fully 3D experience was clearly a tempting one. It's actually a nice touch that some of the spirit of Java remains in the style of the game, according to the team. "JavaScript is really good at doing these vector shapes, which don't look like other games generally. So, we sort of fell into this very nice new flat aesthetic because of this base we were working in [for *Push Me Pull You*]," explains Strasser. "With the *Goose Game* it's sort of similar. I think we're pretty good at acknowledging what our strengths are and where we want to put our energies into… And we don't want to texture things," he laughs.

"We kind of embraced that constraint and decided that's not where we're going to put our energy, but what can we do to make a game look interesting when it's flat colours, untextured?" asks Disseldorp. "There are so many different places you can take that and I think it's interesting that for a while that flat colour, 3D, low poly aesthetic was kind of everywhere, but also all quite similar and now I think we're seeing a resurgence of it, but people are taking it in very different directions with different kinds of lighting and different gradients and things like that."

So House House had a style and a desire to move into 3D, but the special ingredient to all of this was the goose, which apparently started with a simple stock image of a goose and the suggestion this should be what they make a game about. From that seed grew the stealth experience that's now in production. Interestingly, it was quite an organic process to go from goose to stealth. "Originally we were like 'You'll just be this goose and the people will react to you'," says Disseldorp. "I don't think we really thought about what 'react to you' really meant in a sense, but we wanted there to be people who would notice this goose and play along with whatever you were doing. Some of our first systems were you would move an item and the person would go and tidy up the item and that's a nice conflict you can have. Playing with this it became very clear, very quickly that the scale was so small it felt inappropriate when people could see things behind them."

From limiting the field of view of NPCs the leap to stealth was pretty small as you might imagine, but when you really look at how *Untitled Goose Game* plays out, it's really unlike most stealth experiences you might have seen around. For a start, the point of the game isn't actually to hide, but rather be seen, ducking in and out of cover deliberately. "That does let us use these mechanics that are really common like you hide in a little hiding spot and people can't see you while you're in there or you can push a button that makes a noise and get someone's attention," explains Disseldorp. "They all get transformed by the fact that you're not trying to stay in hiding. Instead you're trying to use people's attention deliberately. Sometimes you're trying to keep their attention away from something else."

"THERE'S THIS FANTASTIC DUTCH TROOP OF GEESE THAT JUST MARCH THROUGH TOWNS"

All of this is of course filtered through the experience of being a goose. Once the stock photo of the goose on its own had served its role, a trip to YouTube was in order to nail the animation. "There's this fantastic Dutch troop of geese that just march through towns," enthuses Strasser. "It's called the Ganzenfanfare if you want to look it up. That was a good way of watching geese just plod along really slowly and get a sense of how that works."

You can't do anything a goose wouldn't reasonably be able to do (from what we've seen thus far, at least) so that also means some unique controls for the game. You can walk, run, honk, flap your wings a bit and reach out for things, but that's about it. "You push down the trigger and the goose bends its neck down, which is something that you see a lot when you watch YouTube videos of geese. Sometimes they run with their neck down low and sometimes they walk with their neck up high," Disseldorp tells us. "The movement isn't something that you just get used to really quickly and then start to ignore. It's something that you feel out and you become the goose as you learn the controls. And it means that these really low level actions like bending over and picking something up can be something that you can fumble in a way that's pretty funny."

"I also like the idea that the goose isn't actually you as the player. You're sort of corralling this animal around," says Strasser. It adds another layer of realism to the goose itself as it sometimes reacts instinctively as a goose might rather than only reacting to your inputs, as Disseldorp goes on to illustrate.

"So, in our game if you walk too close to people you end up running away from them and I think that part of that is that birds have this impulse for self preservation that makes them afraid of getting too close to people and in our game that ends up being a bit like when Mario's on fire he runs uncontrollably. So, that's one of our influences there."

From a simple early concept House House is following every logical thread and taking it as far as it can, building in emergent moments for different systems to interplay, allowing humour to come from naturalistic interactions and above all allowing us as players to know that we're supposed to be having fun as we go. "In a lot of those more serious games when you start poking at the edges and making things react in funny ways, you feel like you're going against the game," suggests Strasser. "Our game kind of embraces that and tells you that's fine. It means you can laugh with the game instead of at it."



Above: The game is structured in what House House describes as a staged sandbox where you can gradually move from one area to the next as you complete the challenges in each area. This sees the goose go from a park and back gardens to the centre of a village. Right: So much of the humour of the game is coming from the use of line of sight and the brazen, cheeky way you can taunt NPCs as the goose.





IN BRIEF

You're a goose. Possibly a rather mean goose. But that's your nature and you have a list of things to do in town, so civility be damned







FINDING THE FUNNY

Untitled Goose Game is an inherently funny game to play with the moments of comedy often arising out of simple interactions between the goose and the objects or people around it. But what sort of comedy influences did House House draw from?

"I think we tend to look at older cartoons," says Nico Disseldorp. "Things that don't have too much dialogue work better with our game. I think that's part of what makes the comedy work, is the fact that we don't need to do anything as complicated as human dialogue."

The farce of misdirection and calamity that then ensues all plays out like a classic silent film. "With a human and a goose it's really believable that this is kind of a silent interaction that's mainly conveyed with prolonged eye contact or something like that. For those sorts of things, like silent comedies or older cartoons, I think they fit what we're doing more."

"I think it's all about the eye contact between the people and the goose," adds Jake Strasser. "There's so much in that relationship that people get to interpret as much as they like."



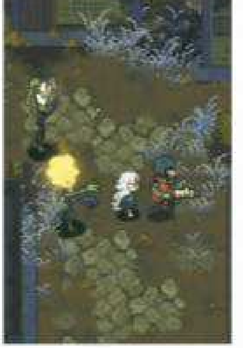
EASTWARD IS AN ADVENTURE GAME YOU'LL FALL IN LOVE WITH

→ ONE TO WATCH FOR 2019

FORMAT: **PC** | PUBLISHER: **CHUCKLEFISH** | DEVELOPER: **PIXPIL** | RELEASE: **TBC 2019** | PLAYERS: **1**

It's easy to fall in love with *Eastward*. It takes just seconds for it to burrow deep into the subconscious, returning to the fore of your mind whenever you need a little boost to get through a difficult day. Its evocative style and upbeat chiptune soundtrack work to ensure that this creative endeavour – a partnership between developer Pixpil and *Stardew Valley* publisher, Chucklefish – is instilled as one of the most anticipated indie games of 2019, an experience that looks as alluring as it does utterly charming thanks to its artistic direction.

But there's more to this whimsical game than mere nostalgia for *EarthBound* and The Legend Of Zelda alone. Sure, it looks great and, yeah, it sounds even better, but we were a little surprised to find that this is an adventure with more to it than meets the eye. You need to know about the two starring characters, John and Sam. The duo awaken from isolation beneath the planet's surface, emerging to the outside world to discover a landscape in ruin, with humanity's presence diminished and strange creatures descending upon what remains of civilisation. From there, of course, you set out to save it.

Below: Joel Corelitz (*Unfinished Swan, Gorgoa*) and Hyperduck Soundworks (*Dust: An Elysian Tail, The Adventure Pals*) are handling the audio and soundtrack for the game, a close collaboration that is delivering incredible results.



Eastward is a single-player experience, but it's one that comes with dual protagonists. You'll be able to dynamically switch between the two throughout the course of the game, using their individual skills to help take on combative threats and solve perplexing puzzles. It's the moments that the pair come together where the game finds its heart though, as the duo set about investigating and introducing themselves to the remnants of society. It's a game packed with characters, and it's here where it finds its own, with the cast of weird and wonderful townsfolk establishing *Eastward* as a game positively brimming with personality.

That all said, we'd be remiss if we didn't cycle back to the visuals. *Eastward* looks incredible; Pixpil has delivered a fusion between 2D art and 3D effects that brings life to its spaces. The studio has achieved this by combining an open-source development system, MOAI, with a proprietary engine of its own design. It's a beautifully lit and wonderfully staged adventure game, retaining the aesthetic of a 2D game without sacrificing any of the depth or ambience so commonly seen in 3D releases.

What we're trying to say is that Chucklefish continues to prove it has an excellent eye when it comes to its publishing endeavours. *Eastward* is scheduled to land next year on PC (other formats are TBC), and we have a feeling that it's going to be one of those indie games that demands your attention.





IN BRIEF

Chucklefish's latest endeavour as a publisher, a gorgeous adventure game with light RPG elements from Shanghai-based studio Pixpil

IN BRIEF
With its newfound independence, IO Interactive is doubling down on making *Hitman 2* the ultimate assassination sandbox experience

HITMAN 2 BRINGS SOME COMPETITION TO THE MIX

→ IT'S A RACE TO THE KILL FOR IO'S LATEST

FORMAT: **PS4, XBOX ONE, PC** | PUBLISHER: **WARNER BROS** | DEVELOPER: **IO INTERACTIVE** | RELEASE: **13 NOV** | PLAYERS: **1-2**



HITMAN'S FIRST MULTIPLAYER

1 This is the first time in the series' history that a one-on-one multiplayer experience has been available to players. That's pretty extraordinary if you ask us. After all of these years of online experimentation and some good examples of stealth-based multiplayer, Hitman is finally making the leap, but it's doing so in a really interesting and innovative way, which makes the wait seem worth it.



SHARED KILLS

2 Ghost Mode sees you up against another Agent 47. You must score five points, which are earned through target kills that go unspotted and lost for killing non-targets. The targets apply to you both, and if your opponent gets the kill first then a countdown will appear giving you only a few seconds to also get the kill before that target is lost to you. A new randomly allocated target will then appear somewhere else in the world.



SIMULTANEOUS NOT SYNCHRONOUS

3 You cannot attack the other agent (hence Ghost Mode), and most of your actions do not affect their experience. If you go for a somewhat chaotic run through the game it will not affect the demeanour of NPCs in your opponents world and vice versa. This means you can play how you want to with some degree of confidence that your play style will not be ruined or interrupted by your adversary. It's a nice twist on the multiplayer format.



GHOST ITEMS

4 The exceptions to the non-interference rule of the game are the Ghost Items. Ghost Crates hold randomly generated items that only one player can grab, so if you reach the Crate first, the other agent has to go without. Similarly, Ghost Items, like a coin, can be used to affect both realities rather than just your own, getting the attention of a guard, for instance, to ruin the run of your opponent.

SURVIVAL INSTINCTS

Avalanche has set out to build its biggest and most expressive creative sandbox ever. For Rico to survive such a dangerous and destructive locale, the studio decided to reconfigure some of the character's core tools. The grapple has been overhauled and can be fully customised, with the increase in tethers and functionality bringing a newfound depth to the system – perfect for combos with airlifters and boosters – making it a wonderfully powerful and creative tool.

Solis, meanwhile, is the deadliest country Just Cause has ever thrown us into, and that means we'll need a few new tricks up our sleeve to survive the South American hotspot. Fortunately, Rico has a suite of new tools to help him beat the spikes of extreme weather and more intelligent enemy forces.

"AVALANCHE IS TAKING THIS AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO SHOWCASE THE LATEST ITERATION OF ITS PROPRIETARY APEX ENGINE"



A WORLD REBORN

Traversal has always been one of the best aspects of Just Cause, but it always felt a little detached from the world. Now, everything in the game is pushing you towards moving more easily and smoothly – vehicles have been totally overhauled to be more fun to utilise, while the addition of extreme weather effects lets you move faster across the world via the wing-suit, as well as witness some scenes of incredibly impressive, physics-driven destruction. The suite of traversal tools, meanwhile, has been entirely expanded.

JUST CAUSE 4 IS THE BEST THE SERIES HAS EVER BEEN

→ AVALANCHE IS REIGNING IN ITS FOCUS TO CREATE A MORE DESTRUCTIVE EXPERIENCE

FORMAT: **PS4, XBOX ONE, PC** | PUBLISHER: **ROCKSTAR GAMES**
DEVELOPER: **ROCKSTAR STUDIOS** | RELEASE: **Q2 2018** | PLAYERS: **1-TBC**

If we've levied one consistent criticism at Avalanche Studios over the last 12 years, it's that the studio has never quite struck the right balance between the various tenets of Just Cause's design. It builds gameplay systems that inspire emergent opportunism, but it keeps the tools to indulge in the chaos at arms length; the action is bold and boisterous, trapped within narrative structures that are slow and ponderous; it presents worlds designed to be torn apart while failing to populate them with anything of any real substance. Just Cause games can so often feel like they are set within a sandbox that doesn't allow any toys, where you're left to create your own fun with whatever your brain can conjure.

Just Cause 4 is pushing back against that assertion. Avalanche is taking this as an opportunity to showcase the latest iteration of its proprietary Apex engine, with the improved technology allowing the team to drive a host of improvements into Just Cause that really bring its world to life – the results really are something to behold. Improved artificial intelligence, next-level destruction and physics simulation, and overhauled tools are just a few of the additions that are going to ensure that *Just Cause 4* is the ultimate free-form action experience. Go anywhere, do anything, destroy everything along the way.

IN BRIEF

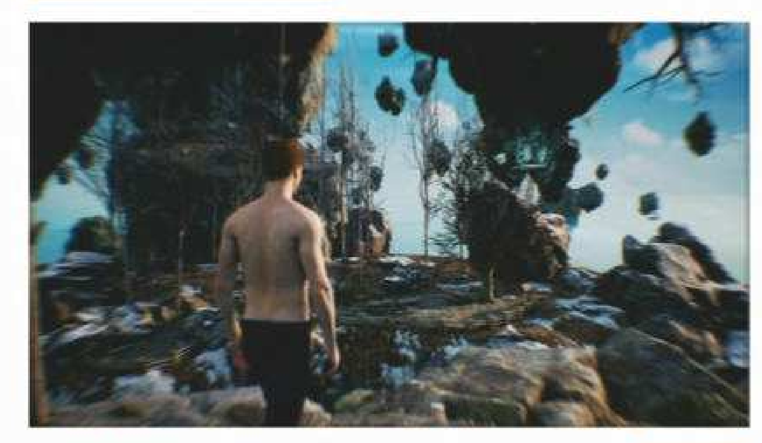
Rico Rodriguez returns for another outrageous adventure, this time in the fictional South American country of Solis



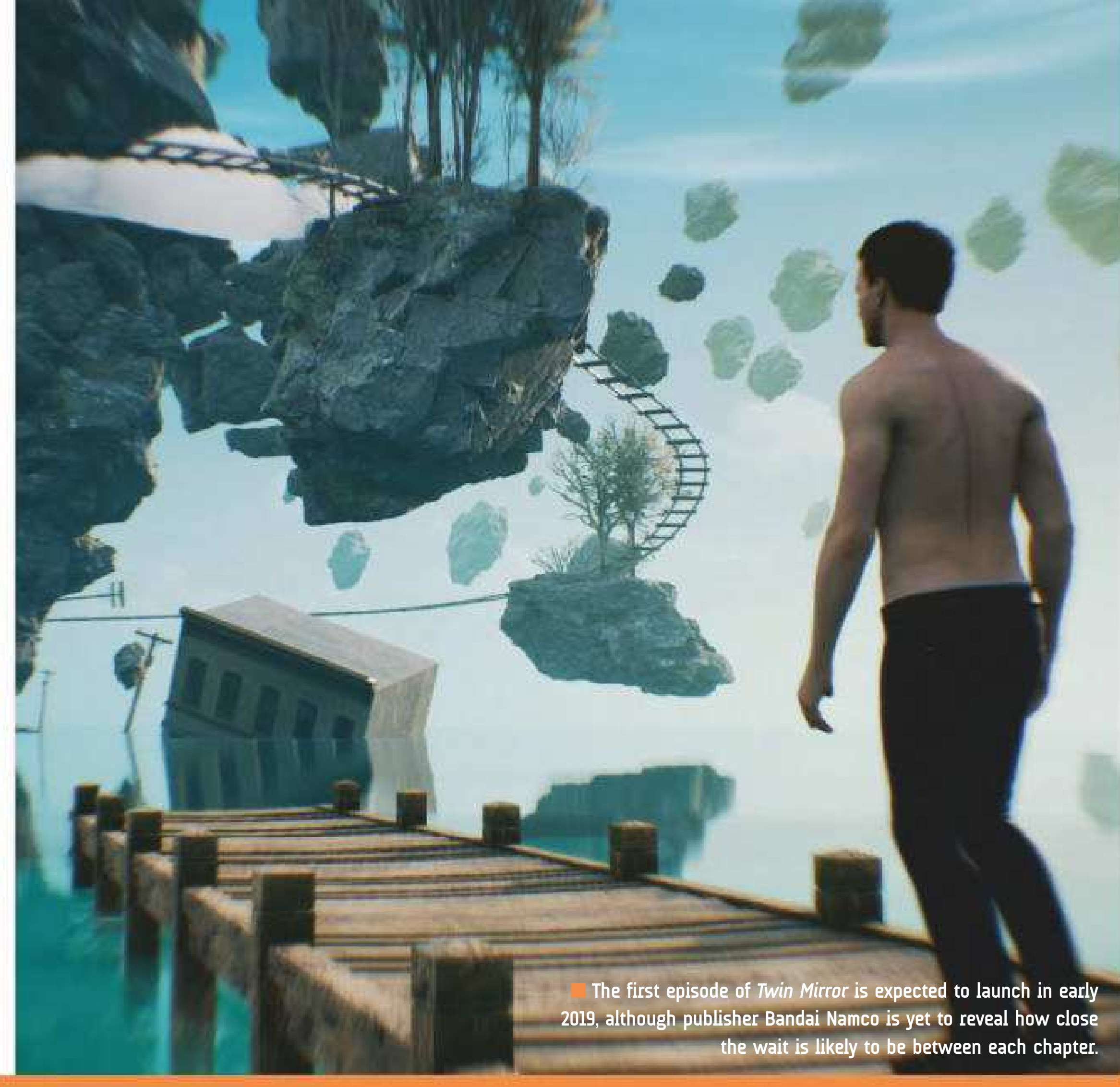


A GREATER CHALLENGE

The soldiers inhabiting Just Cause's various vistas have always been more of an annoyance than a viable threat and that's something Avalanche was keen to address this time out. The variety of enemy archetypes on display has been greatly diversified, as too has their ferocity in combat. You will now have a reason to better experiment with everything you have in front of you, with only the most daring and adventurous players making it through *Just Cause 4*'s most challenging enemy encounters.







The first episode of *Twin Mirror* is expected to launch in early 2019, although publisher Bandai Namco is yet to reveal how close the wait is likely to be between each chapter.

ENTER YOUR MIND PALACE IN **TWIN MIRROR**

→ HANDS-ON WITH DONTNOD'S LATEST NARRATIVE EXPERIMENT

FORMAT: **PC, PS4, XBOX ONE** | PUBLISHER: **BANDAI NAMCO** | DEVELOPER: **DONTNOD ENTERTAINMENT** | RELEASE: **2019** | PLAYERS: **1**

We recently had the opportunity to sample but a taste of *Twin Mirror*, a slice of introductory gameplay cut from the first episode of the game, *Lost On Arrival*. It's weird; pretty bloody weird. Then again, at this point we wouldn't really expect anything less from Dontnod.

We quickly hit the beats of the trailer. We are introduced to Sam, a man with a sad story that has led him down a sad path: to a downtrodden part of small-town America. Then he wakes up with a cracking hangover, and all hell breaks loose; his shirt is covered in blood, he can't remember a thing, and there's a spritely manifestation of his sub-conscious darting in and out of the hotel room, goading him. If that wasn't enough to process, he has got a receptionist slamming on his door telling him that he's about to miss checkout, and nobody likes a late fee. So Sam retreats into his mind palace in an attempt to figure some things out.

Oh, yeah, we should probably explain. One of *Twin Mirror*'s primary game mechanics is tied around your activities in Sam's mind palace – a space where fragments of his memory live and contort, somewhere that we will be able to use to reconstruct and reinterpret information from his past. It's here where we recreate the hotel room in an attempt to figure out what the hell happened the night before. This vision of the room can be manipulated, giving us the time and space to change details in the room and attempt to trigger the recollection of a memory.

It's an interesting idea, and one that isn't all that far removed from a similar system seen in Dontnod's *Remember Me*. But there's something to *Twin Mirror* that feels a little more engrossing and enveloping than that particular previous experiment. A psychological thriller in a world in which nothing is quite as it seems; a murder mystery with a protagonist constantly at odds with his own memory and perception of reality? That's certainly something we can get behind, so long as Dontnod can clear up some of the presentation and framerate problems we witnessed in our demo.

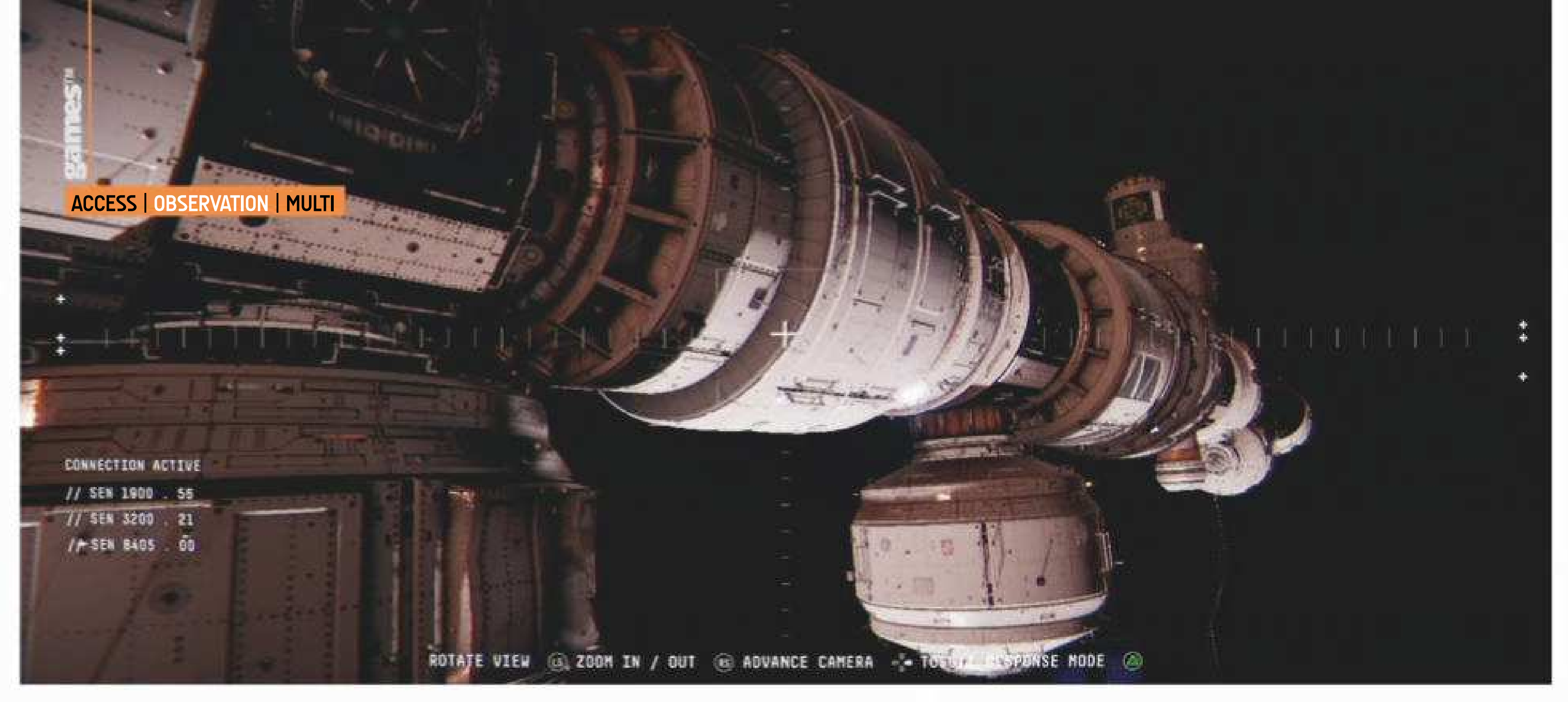
IN BRIEF
Dontnod takes on small-town America in this upcoming supernatural thriller

Still, for something so obviously narrative-driven and inherently focused around branching decisions, it's difficult for us to get a taste for how all of this will play out across the three chapters. But it certainly has our attention, although, as with everything that comes out of Dontnod, it's simply impossible to know whether this will be another *Life Is Strange*, or whether it'll be relegated to the annals of history like *Remember Me* and *Vampyr*.





Above: *Twin Mirror* is a psychological thriller that will seemingly take great delight in subverting expectations and throwing you into a litany of challenging situations.



BECOME THE GHOST IN THE MACHINE WITH OBSERVATION

→ A BIT LIKE 2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY, BUT FROM HAL'S PERSPECTIVE

FORMAT: **PS4, PC** | PUBLISHER: **DEVOLVER DIGITAL** | DEVELOPER: **NO CODE** | RELEASE: **Q2 2019** | PLAYERS: **1**

It's good to see that the little flurry of space station and abandoned astronaut games from a year or so ago hasn't dampened the attraction of the setting for others, because *Observation* is looking like a fascinating new twist on the classic thriller format. Where *Adr1ft* and *Tacoma* placed you in the shoes of an astronaut trying to either uncover a mystery or survive a recent disaster, *Observation* might be best described as the game where you play as the space station itself.

It's a fun concept, and that's not terribly surprising coming from No Code, the developer who previously delivered *Stories Untold*. Where that horror game looked to subvert classic text adventure games and give them a modern spin (to great effect), *Observation* seems to be doing something similar with the point and click genre, albeit in such a unique way that the origins of the experience are rather nicely disguised.

You'll play as S.A.M. (Systems Administration and Maintenance), the AI operating system of the space station Observation after some sort of event has left one of your crew, Dr Emma Fisher, stuck in an airlock and the rest apparently missing. As you reboot yourself, you gradually need to use the cameras around the station to regain access to different controls and help Dr Fisher to not only get systems back online across the vessel, but also work out what happened, where the rest of the crew is and ultimately where exactly the station is.

Much like *Stories Untold*, the use of setting and the viewpoint of the protagonist gives you a completely new and more immersive perspective on events, even though it might appear that you're at an even greater remove. While in the horror game you played text adventures within a virtual space that saw that environment react to your in-game decisions (which was pretty spooky), as the AI of the ship you are not the one in peril, but you *are* responsible for this astronaut's well-being, and since you're a person, not a computer, how you react and the speed at which you work will be noticed by Dr Fisher in the game.

"HOW YOU REACT AND THE SPEED AT WHICH YOU WORK WILL BE NOTICED BY DR FISHER IN THE GAME"

We love this idea of placing us as players into these odd roles that make the characters distrust our motivations. While our mission may be to save Dr Fisher, we can choose to explore the outside of the ship to look for clues about the events that lead up to our involvement, and we can occupy a floating drone inside the ship to move more freely and catch blind spots in the camera coverage. In the meantime, every system we need to control means solving a little puzzle, as if we're having to remember how to be a computer again and interface with all of the systems. This will involve looking over wire-frame renderings of the station for damage reports, defragmenting memory to try to find lost data and lots of other interactions with rather retro-looking computer interfaces. All the while, we'll also be getting strange interference and messages on our HUD telling us to 'Bring Her'. What could it all mean?

Given the team's background in horror, we wouldn't be surprised if all of this takes a pretty dark turn as the plot unfolds, perhaps even revealing some culpability on the part of S.A.M. or Dr Fisher, but for the moment this is looking like an incredibly tense, smart and really gorgeously rendered space station thriller, easily the equal of the also pretty good-looking *Adr1ft* from a couple of years back. It has some of the lingering dread of *Tacoma* and some equally excellent voice acting from what we've seen so far, which is also a good place to start. This type of location is always an intriguing one, the 'lost in space' concept well-trodden, but ripe for twisting, and the perspective that's been chosen seems like a great way of exploring some classic genre conventions from a new angle.

We'll admit that when *Stories Untold* was about to come out we nearly wrote it off as a *Stranger Things* coat-tail jumper, but having been thoroughly schooled by the final release, we will not be making that same mistake again. No Code is a developer to watch in terms of creating genuinely new and exciting gaming experiences, and you should be prepared to jump on board next spring.

■ Above: There are tons of cameras all around the space station Observation, which you can switch between at will. Many are on the inside of the station so that you can access systems and check in on rooms, while others are on the exterior. Right: *Observation* is clearly a creepy game, but that seems inherent to the scenario with only one human character seemingly in the world and all sorts of strange noises and happenings on the station.

■ Right: As the AI, you experience what it's like to manually interact with all of the digital systems that the crew simply request and see the results of. It's an interesting twist on point and click puzzle-solving mechanics.

IN BRIEF

The space station Observation has experienced a catastrophic event. As the system AI, can you help the last remaining astronaut get home?









A QUESTION OF CONSCIOUSNESS

One of the reasons that *Observation* has caught our attention is how it is placing us in the role of the AI of the ship in what feels like a pretty direct nod to *2001: A Space Odyssey* and other tales of space exploration where a ship AI becomes self-aware. We are self aware, so by extension so is S.A.M. the moment we begin playing, but does the crew of Observation know that? Will Dr Fisher be comfortable with you exhibiting human-like reactions and curiosities? Will she grow to distrust you much as Dr David Bowman grows to distrust HAL 9000 in the Stanley Kubrick film? And could the game actually go even deeper than that, as Kubrick did, and explore a bigger philosophical question through this perspective? There are lots and lots of questions that we're looking forward to answering when the game launches.







IN BRIEF

Supermassive Games goes multiplatform, unleashing an anthology series designed to span the sub-genres of horror

WHAT COMES NEXT?

Man Of Medan is the first game to arrive as part of The Dark Pictures Anthology – what comes next is yet to be revealed. This standalone title is effectively a ghost story, one that's reliant on carefully building an overwhelming sense of unease and dread through claustrophobic corridors and some smart audio cues. Supermassive's CEO Pete Samuels is keen to note that the studio has an array of plans for future releases, spanning the entire horror genre. "At Supermassive, we have a passion to deliver powerful cinematic stories and we're following on from titles like *Until Dawn* and *The Inpatient* by telling new horror stories that we expect the fans will want to play. Each game in the series will feature a brand new story, setting and characters. The Anthology format gives us the opportunity to tap into a variety of horror sub-genres. We've identified 39 that we'd love to represent in the Anthology, but that would take some time!"



THE DARK PICTURES ANTHOLOGY WANTS TO TELL A DIFFERENT TYPE OF HORROR STORY

→ SUPERMASSIVE'S PITCH FOR A RETURN TO ITS UNTIL DAWN GLORIES...

FORMAT: **PS4, PC, XBOX ONE** | PUBLISHER: **BANDAI NAMCO GAMES** | DEVELOPER: **SUPERMASSIVE GAMES** | RELEASE: **TBC 2019** | PLAYERS: **1**

Did you know that it has only been three years since the release of *Until Dawn*? It feels like it hit a lifetime ago, doesn't it? We can't be certain as to why that's the case, although if we were to hazard a guess it might be because *Until Dawn* threatened to redefine how stories could be told across interactive spaces – lessons precious few developers have embraced in the intervening years.

Instead, we've been forced to wait patiently for Supermassive Games to pick up where it left off and begin iterating upon the ideas presented in its experimental horror game. That patience hasn't paid off either. The studio's flirtation with VR has been divisive, to say the least, while *Hidden Agenda* (the title designed to take the *Until Dawn* model and apply it to a cooperative-driven Playlink adventure) failed to meet expectation.

With its latest project, it feels as if Supermassive is asking for another chance to prove itself in this space. Though, given its recent output, the decision to create something as broad in scope as an off-kilter anthology series has also been met with some trepidation. It's a cute idea, but then all of the studio's creative endeavours since 2015 have been in one way or another. That said, we could hardly pass up the chance to play through a handful of scenes from the first entry to The Dark Pictures Anthology, *Man Of Medan*. At its core, this is the first game to launch in a series of standalone, cinematic, branching-narrative titles that will span the sub-genres of horror; Supermassive is aiming to lean on its passion for cinematic storytelling within interactive environments here and we see that reflected in the setup to *Man Of Medan* immediately.

"IT IS SUFFOCATING, A THRILLER THAT LEANS ON INCREMENTALLY INCREASING TENSION RATHER THAN STRAIGHT-UP JUMP SCARES"

A group of young Americans head out to the South Pacific Ocean in search of a good time and rumoured WWII wreckages. It doesn't go to plan – the expedition, not the party – and they get lost within a storm and eventually find themselves trapped aboard a ghost ship. You know, a typical weekend out at sea with the crew.

It's difficult to not be immediately impressed by the visual fidelity; the interiors of the rusting ship are atmospheric and evocative, effortlessly establishing an undercurrent of tension throughout our time exploring the ship; the facial and body animation is among some of the best we've ever seen, too, further cementing the studio's ambition to create adventures wholly driven by characters rather than inputs. The change, from Decima engine (used for *Until Dawn*, the propriety system engineered by Guerrilla Games) to the Unreal 4 Engine, has worked wonders in this respect.

The demo itself was something of a slow burn, which we believe will be indicative of the full, final release. You move from room to room under constant duress in search of your friends and a few answers, the walls slowly closing in around you as you do. It is suffocating, a thriller that leans on incrementally increasing tension rather than straight-up jump scares. Interactions are made much in the same vein as *Until Dawn* or *Hidden Agenda*, in that you are largely left to your own devices, free to follow your intuition and explore whatever oddities catch your attention.

It's certainly interesting as a concept, but what this demo failed to showcase was the degree of choice and consequence that will ultimately run through *Man Of Medan*. Neither did it do a good job of capturing the degrees of variety that will be offered through play. Supermassive promises that there are more branching paths in this title than in any of its previous games – that there are multiple endings and scenarios that emerge based on the decisions you make – but we are yet to see that in action. Given that all of the playable characters can supposedly live or die by the decisions that you make, with the narrative bending around these inevitabilities, we're eager to see this in action.

The Dark Pictures Anthology is an interesting prospect, but there are questions that need to be answered. *Man Of Medan* – from its presentation to its pacing – is slow and calculated. How this plays out across a full-length experience remains to be seen, but we're certainly eager to see Supermassive give the format a shot.



Above: *Man Of Medan* has no release date but we've been assured that the studio is on track to get the game out in 2019. Below: The facial animations are particularly impressive. These characters are able to render a pretty impressive amount of emotion, which only helps to sell the terror of the situation they've been thrust into.





"WHETHER PLAYING SOLO, SPLIT-SCREEN OR ONLINE, YOU'LL BE IN A TEAM OF THREE RACERS, SO TEAMWORK MAKES THE DREAM WORK"

MODES

■ While online racing is where the core of the teamplay is expected to be, there's also going to be plenty of offline content. Team Adventure is essentially the story mode, which mixes racing with other event types. There's also single-player and split-screen multiplayer grand prixes, as well as challenges, though the focus is on breakneck racing, so don't expect any arena-style battle mode. You can, however, ditch the team mechanics and just race solo, because the studio felt it was important to include that as an option, though we expect you will drift back to team-racing.



TEAM TACTICS

■ You have your usual power-ups, but team abilities let you pass items to teammates anytime, while the leading racer can help their lagging teammates by leaving a yellow trail behind that acts like a slipstream. These abilities help build up a gauge that when full will let you unleash a Team Ultimate boost. Crucially, these all have clear UI and audio cues, which means online play will be easy to coordinate with each other, even without voice chat.

CHARACTERS

■ Unlike the fan service of *All-Stars Racing Transformed*, *Team Sonic Racing* only focuses on the blue hedgehog's universe, leading to some obscure appearances (Vector the Crocodile, Big the Cat, really?). Our team composition was also fixed for the demo, with Team Sonic consisting of Sonic, Tails and Knuckles, although you'll be able to mix and match your team in the final game, even racing as duplicates. But with three different racer types – speed, technique and power – a balance lets you take advantage of everyone's unique skills.

TEAM SONIC RACING HAS THE GOODS

→ SMELLS LIKE TEAM SPIRIT FOR SUMO DIGITAL'S BLUE-BLURRED RACER

FORMAT: PS4, XBOX ONE, PC | PUBLISHER: SEGA | DEVELOPER: SUMO DIGITAL | RELEASE: Q1 2019 | PLAYERS: 1-4 (UP TO 12 ONLINE)

IN BRIEF
Sonic & All-Stars Racing Transformed developer Sumo Digital gets behind the wheel again for a team-based racer in the Sonic universe

Mario may be the king of kart-racing, but the blue hedgehog has certainly given the plumber a run for his money. With two well-received racers in the last generation featuring Sonic and other beloved characters across Sega's IPs, Sumo Digital is revving the engines again for a new racer that puts Sonic's universe at the forefront.

It's also taking a lesson from recent multiplayer trends by putting teamplay at its core, which we've also seen in arcade racers this year like *OnRush* and *TrailBlazers*. Whether playing solo, split-screen or online with up to 12 players, you'll be in a team of three racers, so teamwork makes the dream work. Our recent hands-on may have only been in single-player, but even these races proved a challenge against AI opponents. You may comfortably sail past everyone else and drift like a demon, but if you're not doing anything to help your lagging teammates it's not going to count for much.

Here, we break down the team tactics that are the recipe for success, the characters you can expect to control behind the wheel as, and the modes that could slingshot *Team Sonic Racing* to the front of the pack.

IN BRIEF
Dirt Rally is a hardcore take on off-road racing from Codemasters, a true-to-form experience that isn't for the faint of heart

DIRT RALLY 2.0 WANTS TO BE THE MOST AUTHENTIC RACING GAME EVER MADE

→ PREPARE FOR THE MOST FRUSTRATING RIDE OF YOUR LIFE

FORMAT: **PC, PS4, XBOX ONE** | PUBLISHER: **CODEMASTERS** | DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE** | RELEASE: **26 FEBRUARY 2019** | PLAYERS: **TBC**



IT'S ALL ABOUT AUTHENTICITY

1 Codemasters found success with *Dirt Rally* three years ago, and is now eagerly pursuing a sequel, inching ever closer to creating the most authentic off-road racing game ever. *Dirt Rally 2.0* is essentially a huge expansion on everything the original did so well, with the team working to tweak the miniature of the core driving experience and introduce a wide array of new content.



RALLYCROSS RETURNS

2 *Dirt Rally 2.0* is the official licensee of the FIA World Rallycross Championship, and you should expect the content to reflect that. Codemasters has promised it will launch in 2019 with the first rounds of the World RX Championship, with the circuits found in the latter end of the competition included as updates as the season progresses. Codemasters is eagerly answering concerns that were raised over content after *Dirt Rally* launched in 2015 in impressive fashion.



THE ROSTER IS EXPANDING

3 Alongside a host of old favourites and all-new rides – such as the powerhouse Audi S1 RX and Volkswagen Polo R, cars with an acceleration of 0-100kphin less than two seconds – *Dirt Rally 2.0* is actually introducing a completely new class of vehicle to proceedings in the form of the GT class. This means the game will have a pretty sweet balance between speed and muscle across its roster for the first time ever.



IT'S DRAWING FROM REAL LIFE EXPERIENCE

4 In an effort to further improve authenticity, Codemasters is investing heavily in the experience of real rally champions and professional gamers. The studio has touted the collaborations with Jon Armstrong and Ryan Champion, with the real world and virtual racers working to help better capture the feel of rally driving and tweak the new handling model being introduced in 2.0.

EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT DARKSIDERS III

→ IS GUNFIRE GAMES ON TRACK TO DELIVER WITH THIS LONG-AWAITED SEQUEL?

FORMAT: **PS4, XBOX ONE, PC** | PUBLISHER: **THQ NORDIC** | DEVELOPER: **GUNFIRE GAMES** | RELEASE: **27 NOVEMBER 2018** | PLAYERS: **1**



A NEW BEGINNING

1 While *Darksiders III* is indeed a sequel, you needn't have played the two games that preceded it to understand what's going on. In fact, much of the action takes place parallel to the events of the previous games, giving you the chance to see war-torn Earth from the perspective of the Rider of the Black Horse, Fury.

EARTH IN CRISIS

2 Fury – sister to the Horsemen of the Apocalypse – is charged by the Charred Council to hunt down and destroy the Seven Deadly Sins, a group of demons threatening the stability of the Earth. To do so, she will pair up with the Lord of the Hollows and take to stomping through a litany of enemies torn from the annals of biblical folklore.

NEW TYPE OF COMBAT

3 It's fun to see how Darksiders continues to overhaul its combat to better suit its protagonist. War was a brute, Death was cunning, and Fury is a trickster – a mage that excels when keeping enemies at range. She is able to utilise a whip and variety of spells to take enemies on at a distance, lending *Darksiders III* a more strategic edge when compared with its predecessors.

FRESH CHALLENGE

4 Given the changes to the combat systems, it means you'll need to approach each enemy as a singular, viable threat. Getting surrounded can quickly lead to your demise, and so you'll need to think about engagements more methodically. Dodging can lead to powerful counter-attacks and is a must in this environment of ever-present challenge.

INTO THE OPEN WORLD

5 Given that a post-apocalyptic Earth will serve as the playground for this adventure, you'll be happy to learn that *Darksiders III* will indeed play out across an open world. Unlike *Darksiders II*, however, a larger emphasis has been placed on exploration and experimentation. Many areas will only become accessible as you push further through the game.

IN BRIEF
The long-awaited sequel to 2012's *Darksiders II*, a sequel many of us believed would never be made





NEW NINTENDO INFLUENCES

6 The Darksiders games were some the closest PlayStation and Xbox owners ever got to an experience in the same vein as The Legend Of Zelda. Gunfire Games is looking elsewhere for its Nintendo influence this time, however, invoking Metroid as a touchstone for its world design and progression systems.

TOTAL FREEDOM

7 Once you take on and defeat the first boss, Envy, you'll essentially have total freedom in the space. Not unlike the Mega Man games or *Breath Of The Wild*, you will be able to take on the remaining boss characters in any order that you like. A compass will help guide you to these powerful foes, although it's still easy to get lost in the world.

LEARN THE ENVIRONMENTS

8 *Darksiders III* won't feature a traditional world map. Instead, you'll need to learn the environments if you want to properly navigate them. The art style is distinctive enough that you'll be able to identify key locales and rely on using landmarks to help guide you forward through the story and lead you back to new areas for further exploration.

IT'LL BE RPG-LITE

9 Gunfire Games was eager to keep some semblance of the RPG systems that appeared in *Darksiders II*, but they have been heavily modified and paired back. Fury will unlock many new abilities, which will give her access to previously inaccessible areas, and improve her veracity in combat as you defeat enemies and gain more experience.

IT'S DIFFERENT

10 In so many ways, *Darksiders III* feels like a game from another time. It's a step back from advancements in the space that we've seen from the likes of *God Of War*, instead offering something that feels like a bit of a throwback. We won't know how successful the studio has been until we get our hands on the final release on 27 November.



"I have triplets… it's really hard to find a four-player multiplayer game"
TIM WILLITS, STUDIO DIRECTOR, ID SOFTWARE



WHY I ♥…

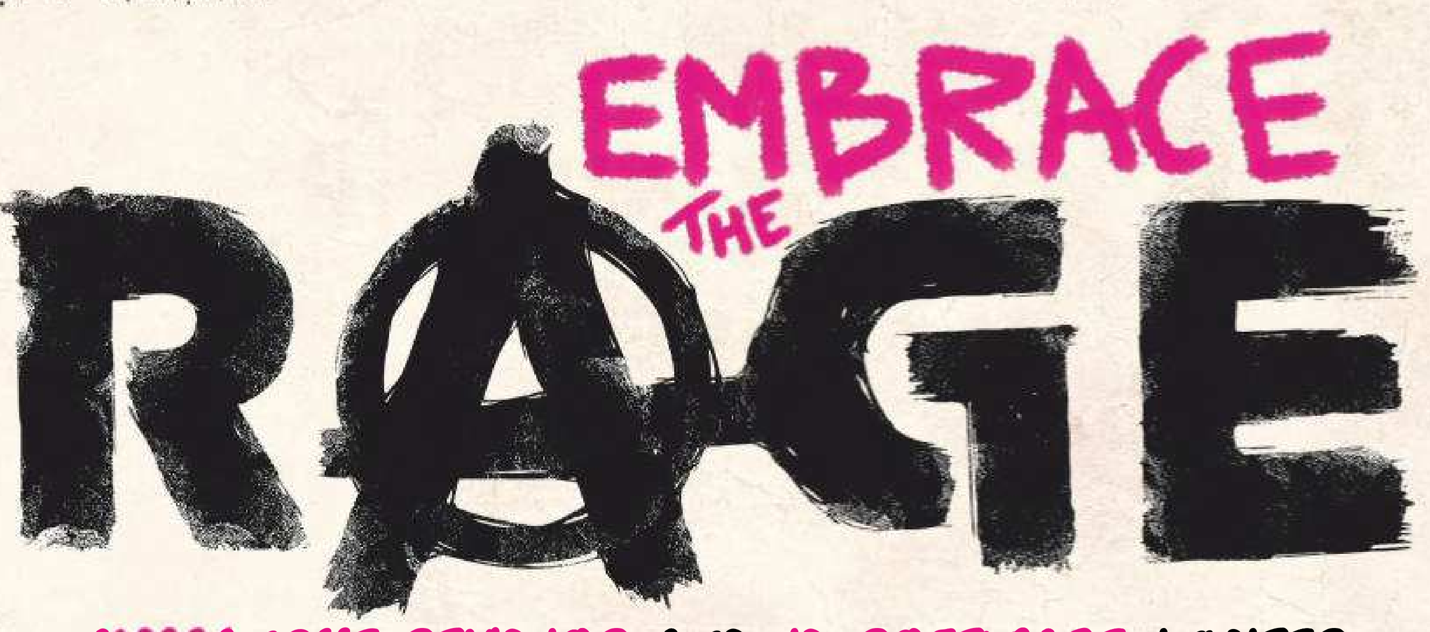
LITTLEBIGPLANET 2

TIM WILLITS
STUDIO DIRECTOR, ID SOFTWARE

“In my family, we are all **LittleBigPlanet** *fans. I don’t know if you know this, but I have triplets… it’s really hard to find a four-player multiplayer game. They are 14 now, and we started playing when they were all about seven. For me to be able to get three seven year olds to jump from one moving platform to another moving platform at the same time… I should have gotten a trophy for that!*

It was always a lot of fun. My wife would come and watch us play, the game had fun music, everybody had their own Sackboy or Sackgirl and, you know… it is just definitely a game that I have some very fond memories of playing.”





AVALANCHE STUDIOS AND ID SOFTWARE INVITES US INTO THE POST-APOCALYPTIC PARTY OF 2019

"If you make a good game, if it's fun and if you offer good value for money, then people will play it," Tim Willits begins to explain as we ruminate on the widely held perception that single-player games are being suffocated out of existence by the multiplayer behemoths of the world. "You know, I've been in this industry long enough that I know how this stuff goes… I'm not going to stress about it."

id Software's long-running studio head isn't going to stress about such a consideration because he couldn't be in a better position to rebuke it. He is, after all, overseeing a studio that's driving the quality of single-player shooters up across the industry, not to mention the beginning of what is being labelled an "unprecedented partnership in gaming".

Rage 2 is best capped as a wild fusion of id Software's best-in-class FPS mechanics with Avalanche Studio's mastery of open-world chaos. This is the development outfit behind such industry mainstays as Doom, Wolfenstein and Quake jumping into the sack with the studio responsible for the likes of Just Cause, *Mad Max* and *Renegade Ops.* A picture of what that looks like and how it plays should form in your mind with ease, and »

THE ILLUSION OF INTELLIGENCE

NOT ALL AI IS CREATED EQUALLY ACCORDING TO AVALANCHE

Something that impressed us immensely as we played *Rage 2* was the way in which the AI would shout out instructions to each other and attempt flanking positions to try to draw us out of position. It forced us to be on the move and adapt our tactics throughout the course of an encounter, switching up weapons and abilities on the fly. We asked the team to tell us more about how that all came together.

"I think you wanna create the illusion of intelligence," says senior game designer Loke Wallmo, laughing. "That's really important. id Software is really good at that; if you played *Doom* [2016] you really feel like some enemies are smarter than others, and I think there's real sophistication there."

Certainly, the legacy of id is one of AI, and the appeal of enemy encounters is at the heart of its most popular games. If you can't make an encounter with the enemy as engaging and involving as possible then it just doesn't stand up to that rich heritage. But it's not all about smarts, as Wallmo explains, it's also about AI awareness of other AI and the degree to which they take that into account in battle.

"They're somewhat aware of how many other enemies are active in the combat around them. It's part of the soundbox thing, as well. You can approach from any direction, like we talked about, and they have to react naturally to that. But then, when you're facing the Goon squad, they should feel different to the Authority, or maybe some of more regimented or trained gangs. Because they are supposed to be crazy maniacs. So they have a different approach in combat. They might not always act rationally."

your heart rate should rise in anticipation. But with every high-profile partnership comes the all-important question: will this be a match made in heaven or a recipe for disaster?

If our time with the latest demo build of *Rage 2* was anything to go by, then it would look as if this unlikely collaboration is firing on all cylinders. The 2019 shooter is primed and ready to take the world by storm, bringing explosive action and unprecedented scale together in a way that, frankly, we never truly believed either studio was capable of delivering. Hell, if either of them were capable of doing so, *Rage 2* would likely be a different beast entirely. That's just it though; *Rage 2* is the result of two experienced and influential teams working diligently to seek out the other's best qualities, bringing all of it together into one intoxicating experience.

> "WE HAVE A LOT OF FIRST-PERSON SHOOTER FANS HERE AT THE OFFICE AND THEY WERE SUPER-STOKED TO GET TO WORK ON SOMETHING LIKE THIS"
> **LOKE WALLMO** SENIOR GAME DESIGNER, AVALANCHE STUDIOS

That's important to note, because the two studios do indeed need each other to make something like *Rage 2* a possibility. id Software – as evidenced by *Rage*'s debut in 2011 – struggles with the implementation of open-ended design structures, the power-punch combination of its weighted weapons and reactive artificial intelligence losing its bite when extracted from the meticulously crafted combat arenas it is so famous for establishing. Avalanche, on the other hand, has proven itself to be the master of physics-based emergent gameplay cast out across awesome open-sandbox worlds, even if its combat and AI systems leave a little to be desired. So perhaps now you can see why this partnership has so much potential.

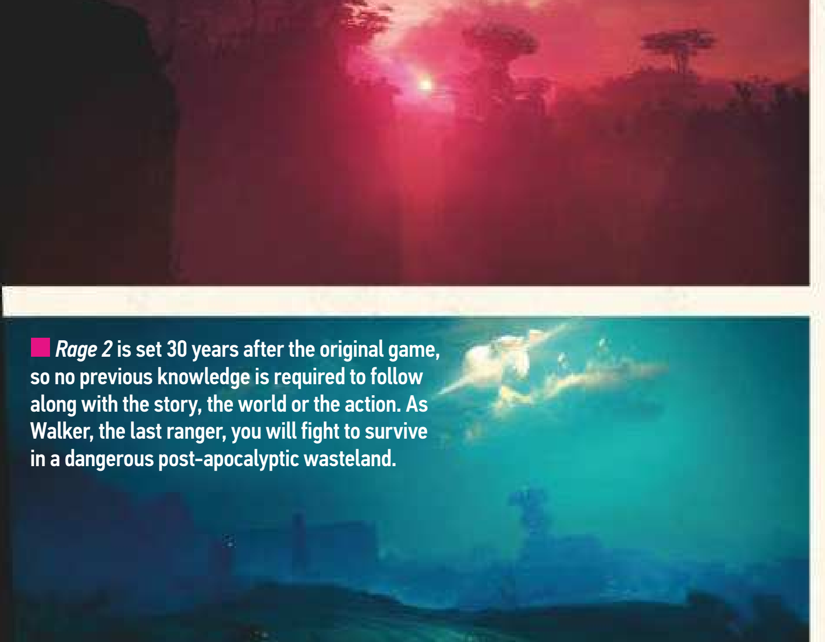
"I like to joke that it's like peanut butter and jelly, it just works!" Willits laughs, though we do quickly admit that the allure of such a combination is likely lost to many of us here, east of the Atlantic Ocean. That's where Avalanche's senior games designer Loke Wallmo jumps into the fray that is quickly emerging in this interview: "*I* like to joke that when we first met these guys it's like we were at a bar. We were at a bar and we looked over, they looked over and someone smiled," he says, laughing. "That really got us to where we are today."

It's a cute anecdote, but we would posit that it is far easier to maintain a lingering smile across a crowded room than it is to make a successful game, let alone one built collaboratively between studios thousands of miles apart. For id, successfully reviving the Rage IP after letting it spend more than half a decade on ice meant seizing the right opportunity when it presented itself. "We have had a desire to go back to Rage for a while. A bunch of people played the original and it was a successful game for us," Willits maintains, and he would know – he was the director of the bloody thing back in 2011.

Still, he continues, Rage is important for id because it has the potential to fill the open-world action game void in id Software's otherwise expansive library of dominant shooter experiences. That's something he hopes to fully realise this time around, keenly aware that *perhaps* its id Tech 5 engine wasn't up to the job, and that *perhaps* the team wasn't quite ready to deliver this type of experience in a genre quickly evolving thanks to the arrival of games like *Borderlands*, *Fallout 3* and *BioShock*, not to mention a litany of others… it was a wild time for the FPS.

Underestimating the needs of the audience and overestimating the capabilities of id isn't a mistake he planned on making twice. "We just never really had the right technology and the right experience to make what we wanted to do with *Rage* originally a reality. So when Avalanche became available, well, we were always big fans of Just Cause, *Mad Max*, their Apex Engine and their experience, so it was a perfect fit for what we wanted to achieve. We are very fortunate that they were willing to work with us and I think we've made something cool, right?"





Rage 2 is set 30 years after the original game, so no previous knowledge is required to follow along with the story, the world or the action. As Walker, the last ranger, you will fight to survive in a dangerous post-apocalyptic wasteland.



The original *Rage* had excellent gunplay and artificial intelligence, but it always felt a little restricted in its world and scope. That's something id has sought to fix by teaming up with Just Cause and *Mad Max* creators Avalanche Studios.

Willits turns to Wallmo as he says this, the two sharing a knowing laugh before they begin to trade stories from their time in the trenches of development. That question was really meant for us, even if both developers are too proud to come out and ask it of us directly. The duo is aware that, despite *Rage* supposedly meeting internal expectations at publisher Bethesda to warrant a sequel, this is a revival that still feels like something of a curveball for many of the perspective players out there. We can't help but shake the feeling that id and Avalanche are in search of affirmation, of word from the press and players alike that its efforts haven't been in vain – wasted on a fool's errand. Well, if it's affirmation that the studios want, then affirmation they will have. We have now qualms being totally honest with you, the teams really have made something pretty damn cool.

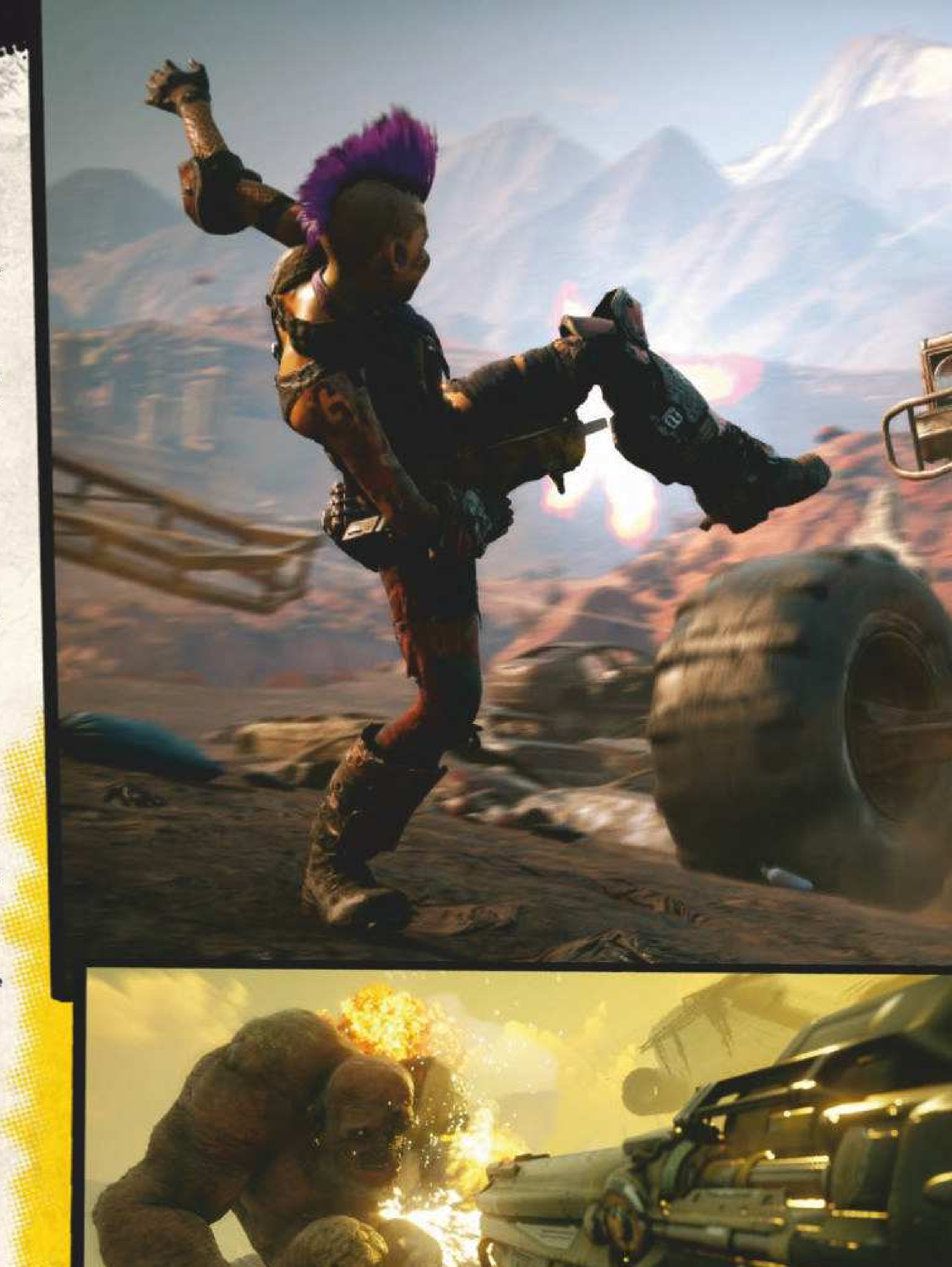
Why is that? Well, it's difficult to say with any real certainty. *Rage 2* is one of those experiences that feels right in your hands; it's a shooter that is positively pulsing with energy and confidence. Distilling that down is difficult, though if we *had* to pin it on any one element, our instinct would be on the chaos it constantly espouses, as if by instinct. *Rage 2* is a refreshing change of pace when compared with anything it is competing with in the genre space right now. Its combination of action and scale is legitimately awesome to behold, as too is how smooth and seamless the entire package feels.

This is largely down to the studios' intent to make you feel empowered at all times, ramping up the difficulty by pumping the screen full of a, at times, frankly ridiculous amount of smart and deadly enemies – it's rare to see a game work so diligently to increase enemy counts in this way, particularly in this day and age as developers chase other avenues of fidelity. Wallmo tells us that Avalanche was focused from the beginning on making you feel like "a superhero of the wasteland", and that's something that it has driven home all throughout development. "We've played around with this idea quite a bit. I think the Nanotrite powers in particular give the player increased dynamics, increased movement and a way to fight without the weapons."

Without weapons. We can see Willits priming himself to leap into the conversation, bewildered as to why anybody would want to play a game bearing the id branding without using the weapons it is so famed for implementing. Wallmo quickly course corrects in an effort to calm his counterpart. "You *will* do the majority of your fighting with weapons, of course," he laughs as Willits begins to settle back into a comfortable lean on the sofa. "But the Nanotrite powers add a lot to the mix; they help improve crowd control, movement, physicality and playfulness. It took us a long while to get that right, but I think – as you've seen today after playing it, hopefully – that you'll feel like they really work very well together."

"It's all about getting you into the action a little bit faster," Willits jumps in, finishing Wallmo's sentiment. "Because *Rage 2* has such a big open world you can approach combat situations from anywhere and in any way that you want to. For example, we reward you for using abilities – it charges your Overdrive, you get different drops – it's one of the many ways we get you into the action and keep you there."

That directive permeates all throughout *Rage 2*. It gets you into action quickly and tries its level best to keep you there, with waves of marauding packs of enemies constantly testing your ability to crowd control, navigate spaces and gun down fast-moving targets. Regardless of whether you are stalking across the surprisingly varied biomes – from desolate deserts, lush jungles and populated makeshift towns – that make up the open-world sandbox on foot or behind the wheel of a vehicle that is primed and ready for war.



You can feel it too as you take to stomping through the meticulously designed interiors that encourage you to blast bullets at just about anything that moves, in spaces that feel like they could have been ripped right out of *Doom* and given a makeover by a decidedly anarchistic landscaper and decorator. Impressively, you also feel it in the wider combat arenas that you'll be propelled between as you complete main quests, side stories and exercises in survival across the open roads; emergent instances of violence are a common threat in *Rage 2* as the various, varied factions bare down on you – these situations will push you to utilise everything in your backpack to eviscerate swaths of enemies and huge hulking beast creatures eager to cut you down. It's fun, it's invigorating and it's everything you'd expect from the combination of these two studios. The gunplay is tight and measured; the vehicular combat looks to be madcap by its very nature, a huge step up from what Avalanche presented in *Mad Max*; the world a vibrant playground that effortlessly drives personality in the game, a place where carnage follows you on every step of your journey. In many respects *Rage 2* seems hell bent on satisfying an impossible array of demands from FPS fans. Want a piece of id's classic, electric combat feel? You got it. Want to engage in high-octane vehicular combat that feels like it would have a place in a George Miller production? Yeah, that's covered. How about making use of an array of kinetic abilities to send the physics system into a tizzy, stretching an array of ridiculous situations out into your cycle of persistent pain infliction. *Rage 2* handles that with ease.

There's a sense that anything can happen to, and around you in *Rage 2*. That's inherently exciting as a set-up for a shooter, particularly one as boisterous as this. That's a feeling that is shared by the folks over at Avalanche, and it's a creative challenge that the team, as Wallmo tells it, really gravitated to throughout development. "What's so great about Rage is that you can pretty much drop anything in there and you can kind of make it make sense within that world. We are always pushing

WHAT IS AN AVALANCHE MOMENT?

HOW RAGE 2'S NEW DEVELOPMENT TEAM IS BRINGING ITS FLAIR TO THE SEQUEL

One of our favourite moments from the original reveal trailer of *Rage 2* was when we caught a glimpse of a massive monster truck being driven through a mass of enemy AI seemingly involved in a pitch battle of their own. It was an incredible moment, largely for the number of characters involved and how engaged they appeared to be in battle. As it turns out, that was something of a random moment recorded by one of the team that happened to capture the very essence of what Avalanche is bringing to the table.

"That's what we call an Avalanche moment, where things just happen to cross paths in a weird way," says senior game designer Loke Wallmo. "Somebody was there capturing it. We have the guy that did the trailer, he just found that thing and we kept it because it's so very much an Avalanche moment."

"Because it wasn't set up," insists id studio director Tim Willits. "He was doing something else and it was like, 'Holy shit!'."

So this was just a random fracas between enemy AI that someone decided to drive a monster truck through the middle of? Seems that way. "They were fighting these guys and they were fighting bad guys and he was hearing both of them and then there was a car," says Wallmo. "And we love those things. So we just try to set up the game so those things can happen… we have no way of guaranteeing that you'll ever see that again, but the systems are there to create those things."



■ While *Rage 2* will have a main quest, you'll be able to duck in and out of it as you please. Stories will be scattered across the open world, side quests and points of interest that you can investigate to learn more about the land and the people that inhabit it.



■ Nanotrites return from the original *Rage*, giving you an array of special powers and ability boosts that can completely change the composition of combat.

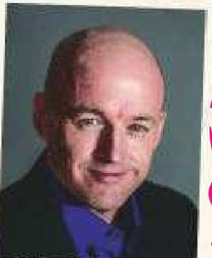
ourselves to do more, and to do crazier things. The amount of freedom we have working in the Rage world is amazing; we don't feel very constrained at all."

We did, of course, require an example… we wish we hadn't asked. "Well, if we wanted to put a giant squid in the game we could have it; a giant squid with lasers on top of it, and as it starts climbing out of the water it starts blasting you with…" Wallmo begins to excitedly exclaim before being cut off by Willits mid-sentence. "Wait, is that not in the game? Why is that not in the game?" he says, laughing. "It's the tentacle physics," Wallmo responds, defiantly. "That is true," concedes Willits. "Tentacle physics are tough."

Tentacle physics are tough. We'll be straight up with you, folks. This isn't how we thought this conversation was going to go. Then again, we wouldn't have it any other way. Wallmo and Willits are easy in conversation; the pair have clearly spent a lot of time together over the years as id and Avalanche collaborated to piece this behemoth experience together – for the record, we did press the pair on whether this squid behemoth would appear as future DLC, but the answer was, you could say, inconclusive.

Still, for Avalanche this was a relatively new experience. Creating a FPS, that is. The studio has typically built out third-person action titles, those of the sandbox variety where the game is often only as fun as you can make it. How has the studio found building out something as tightly paced and meticulous to detail as a game cast from a first-person perspective? It has relished the challenge and jumped at the opportunity. "There are a lot of things that you need to deliver in this type of experience; the intensity of the action is one thing that first-person lends itself really well to. It's different and really rewarding to work with," says Wallmo. "I like how close we are able to get players to the action when they move through our spaces. You know, we have a lot of first-person shooter fans here at the office and they were super-stoked to get to work on something like this. It's honestly been really, really fun for us."

This was something we were eager to clear up with the two studios. The lines of collaboration haven't been clearly defined, and that's something we dived straight into. Listen, the game is radical, but this is **games™** you're reading; if we didn't get right in there behind the scenes, talk a little proprietary technology and otherwise be a little bit of a nuisance for studio executives who were hoping to talk about shotguns – and don't worry, we'll get around to that in a bit – then we wouldn't be doing our jobs properly.



"FOCUSING ON ONE PLAYER ALLOWS US TO DO CRAZY STUFF. WE CAN LITERALLY BREAK THE GAME IF WE WANT TO"

TIM WILLITS STUDIO HEAD, ID SOFTWARE

So, let's do this thing. What's the balance in terms of collaboration? Was it, we wondered, Avalanche building out the base of the game with id then laying its expertise in FPS design down on top of it? Is id handling the weapons and Avalanche handling the world? How does this work, Willits? Tell us, please. "Okay, no. So the Avalanche guys do the work," says Willits with a smile. The versatility and power of the Apex engine – the new tech and toolsets driving *Rage 2* and *Just Cause 4* – was a big factor behind Bethesda's decision to bring Avalanche into the fold, so of course the engineers of it are driving production.

And, consider this for a second… that Apex engine must be something special if it has pushed id – a studio that built its »



While any vehicle in *Rage 2* can be commandeered, you will also have a central vehicle that you can upgrade and customise to make it battle ready, necessary for when you engage in vehicular combat and deadly races.

reputation around expressive, evolutionary technology – to avoid using its own proprietary id Tech 6 engine (*Doom/Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus*) or, you know, that hot new id Tech 7 engine, the one powering 2019's *Doom Eternal*. This is because Apex will let the teams utilise Avalanche's penchant for delivering speedy world-streaming, perfect for when you're blistering across open spaces with a bit of gusto, and creating complex algorithms that keep the ever-bending physics systems in check, necessary when manipulating reality with your array of Nanotrite powers or being thrust into a variety of madcap situations. On top of all of that, it also lets the team establish detailed interior environments without sacrificing fidelity out in the broader outdoor environments.

In fact, according to Willits, ensuring that *Rage 2* functioned as one open experience without any load screens between its various biomes or areas was a huge priority, something that had to be achieved before this project got off the ground. "We wanted it to all fit together in one world," he continues. "*Rage* had some really awesome things about it that were pillars of *Rage 2* – the gunplay, the AI, the racing – but now we can actually make it happen in one open world without having it run level by level with a feeling of disconnection between them all."

That's where Avalanche came into the picture, taking the lead on this hugely ambitious project. "We work with these guys every day. It wasn't like, 'hey, here's some code; go have fun with it!' Because every engine is different, it's the magic sauce and lots of dials… and these guys have lots of dials, which is really

THE COLOUR OF ANARCHY

AVALANCHE AND ID ON THEIR VIBRANT POST-APOCALYPSE

That bright pink and yellow advertising campaign around *Rage 2* isn't a piece of misdirection on the part of Avalanche and id. It's a genuine reflection of a new, more vibrant and colourful backdrop for *Rage 2* and the opportunities that new technology have opened up for the team.

"A lot of that actually came from, first, the desire to push it far from *Rage*," reveals id studio director Tim Willits. "And then looking at what the Apex technology could do for us with the jungles and the forests and the swamps and the overgrown cities. And that brought to us light and colour with the vegetation. That led us to have more colourful characters, and people have evolved and let us have more colourful buildings and skies. And now we have a marketing campaign. So it's really helped establish a unique identity in this world that's sometimes crowded with brown games."

There remains a consciousness within the development team, however, that some connecting thread needs to be maintained from the original. "You can't just add colour to anything," warns senior game designer Loke Wallmo. "So it's a part of the identity of Rage, as well. It's supposed to be fun, crazy, over-the-top, so it works really well with what we're trying to do with the gameplay, with the characters, with the factions. It made a lot of sense to make everything as colourful as we could.





id worked closely with Avalanche to ensure that the details were nailed. You see that reflected across the game, from its incredibly satisfying and weighted weapons to its smart and deadly enemies.

focusing on getting the feeling of the game right. On getting the movement right and the weapons right," Wallmo continues. "Cloud technology and good communication really worked for us. It just removed a lot of those barriers, and that allowed us to be constantly updating each other."

Once you get your hands on *Rage 2* you immediately understand the pull of it. It feels packed, as if it is a world brimming with life and activity. Its world is chaotic and the people that inhabit it are bombastic, all of this only helping to tie each of the game's various elements together. It also helps that *Rage 2* is set a considerable amount of time in the future from the original, feeling entirely detached from anything that has come before in a way that only helps serve the story and environment. That's something Willits was keen to express, by the way. "We have a more open-story structure this time… it's very important for me to note that if you're not familiar with *Rage*, don't stress about playing *Rage 2*. We've set it far enough ahead (30 years) that it has its own kind of personality, a new story and new combat styles that really make it stand out."

"FOR EVERY TEN CRAZY IDEAS THAT YOU HAVE, NINE DON'T WORK. I THINK THAT'S THE SOUL OF GAME DEVELOPMENT RIGHT THERE"

LOKE WALLMO SENIOR GAME DESIGNER, AVALANCHE STUDIOS

nice," Willits continues, although we're not entirely sure that this analogy is playing out the way he wanted it to, and so we crossed over to Wallmo to get his perspective on the collaboration.

"We can use the Cloud for sharing assets, and of course video conferencing, that really worked for us. It's been an easy collaboration, even though we are thousands of miles apart," he says, before getting to the heart of the process. "We've been learning the first-person action game formula… well, it's not really a formula. It's more like a lot of hard work. But it has just been so awesome for us to have this collaboration, because it means that we have been able to learn about FPS design from the masters."

"We talk to id all of the time. We have a completely open structure; it's all about getting their feedback constantly, about

It really does have its own personality and, like we said before, it really does feel like anything could and likely would happen in the course of playing the game. It's easy to wonder what might have been cut along the way with games like these, in games that are just exuding content and personality at every corner. Wallmo admits that this has been a problem with *Rage 2*, although that's largely true of everything that he has worked on.

"For every ten crazy ideas that you have, nine don't work. I think that's the soul of game development right there; you try a bunch of things, many of them sound great on paper and you build them out and it just doesn't work… or there is just some obvious flaw you can't fix. But we have some really, *really* talented developers at Avalanche that love to try stuff out and, if you do that enough, you find a bunch of stuff – systems and mechanics – that really work well together, and then we polish that. We have a lot of fun doing it."

With games getting larger and larger, and more and more packed with content – *Rage 2* is a game on a scale far greater than anything either studio has put its name to in terms of raw content, of that we're certain – does it ever feel like this is time wasted, that could be better spent elsewhere? "I don't think I've »



ever really worked on a project where this hasn't been true in some sense," admits Wallmo. "You can maybe feel like you're wasting time sometimes, especially when you realise you can't use something after investing in it, but there could always be something in it that could be used elsewhere or it can, in turn, give you another idea that actually does work. I think that's just par for the course…"

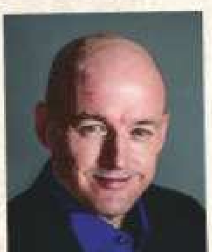
"We've been pretty good at not creature creeping *too much*," Willits jumps in, laughing. "But there's always that risk when you work with a bunch of creative people, particularly a group that, like this one, comes up with some great ideas. But I think we struck a good balance."

"Obviously we've been focusing on the core," says Wallmo. "The gunplay, the Nanotrite abilities, how you jump, how you move, how you fight. That's been our number-one priority, and then we are working with the vehicles and the worlds and locations and everything that's going on in there."

It's easy for the pair to look back on this now, after so many years of working diligently to strike the right balance. Wallmo, when pressed on what he considers to be Avalanche's primary responsibilities on this collaboration, is caught. He's keen to note that the studio approached *Rage 2* with what he calls an "open mind", giving the relationship with id the space to breathe, which in turn allowed the two to work out what was and wasn't important for the game. "We really tried to use our experience and tried to listen to what id wanted out of the game."

Something that id had at one time considered, we were surprised to learn, was bringing multiplayer to *Rage 2*. Thankfully, the studios quickly came to the realisation that keeping the game contained within a single-player campaign would give the teams more flexibility to play with convention, more scope to focus in on fidelity and more time to polish its open world and the content that inhabits it. "Of course we talked about it. It'd be great to do everything all of the time. But we do feel that we are offering a lot of content and playtime for what you get in the base game," admits Willits, who coyly dances around questions of rumoured community elements being introduced post-launch alongside both paid and free DLC content to help add a tail to *Rage 2*'s gameplay for the completionists in the group. "More importantly, focusing on only *one player* allows us to do crazy stuff. We can literally break the game if we want to. If you're having fun, who cares! Right? So that's kinda been our mentality throughout development."

While the two studios did at one time consider multiplayer for *Rage 2*, they ultimately settled on making it a single-player-only experience in an effort to better align its focus. This is going to be a tight, polished, open-world action game.



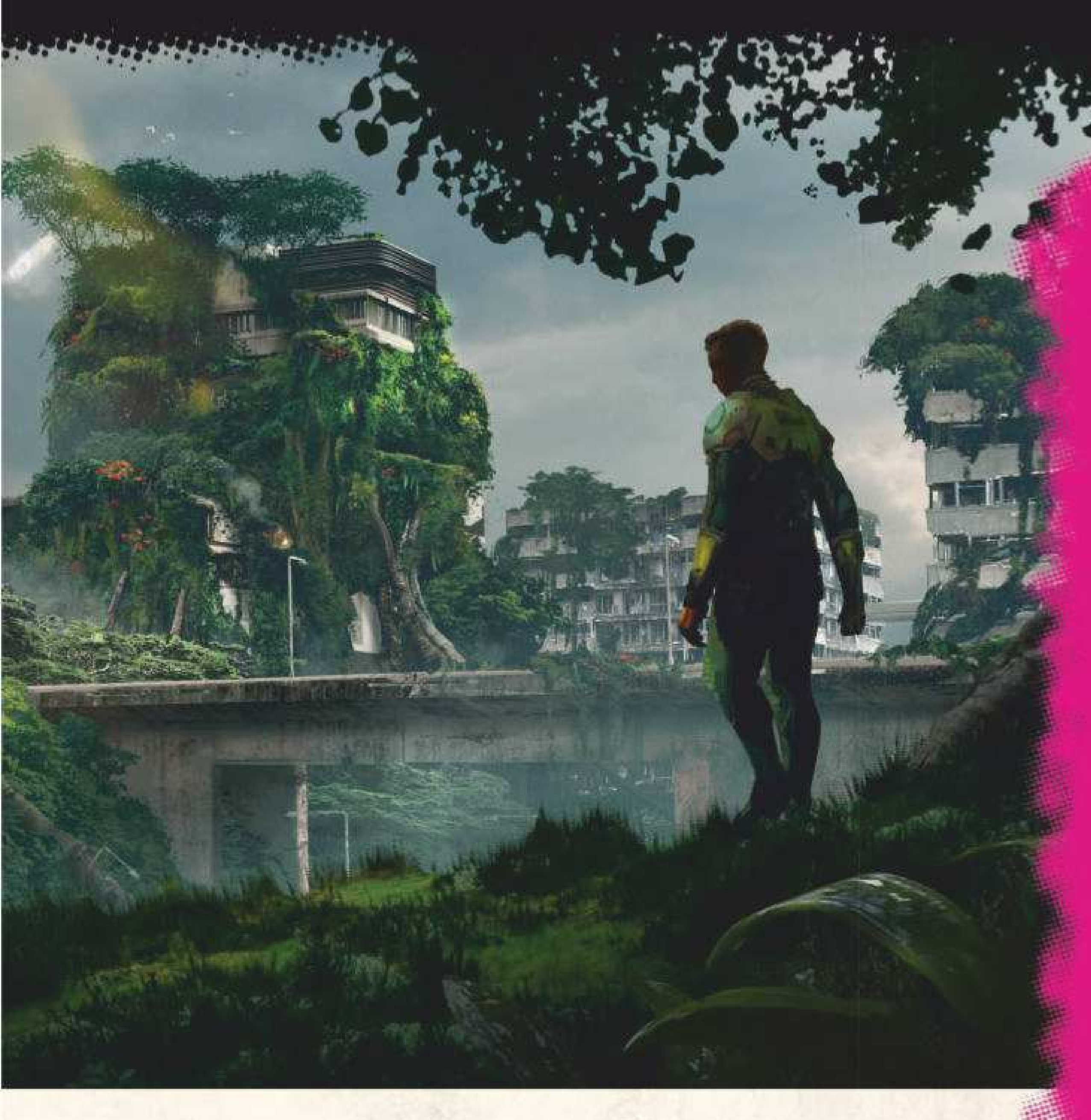
"RAGE 2 HAS SUCH A BIG OPEN WORLD YOU CAN APPROACH COMBAT SITUATIONS FROM ANYWHERE AND IN ANY WAY THAT YOU WANT TO"

TIM WILLITS STUDIO HEAD, ID SOFTWARE

"I think that has allowed us to focus a lot more on that core experience," adds Wallmo. "That core Wasteland Superhero experience. When you don't have to think about balancing multiplayer, or all the networking, or how all of the content in the world is going to stream in for a number of different clients… really, it's allowed us to focus down on the experience."

We believe him, and *Rage 2* is so much better because of it. Of that we are certain. There are core elements of the game that simply wouldn't be as good had the focus become diluted, had the relationship between the two studios been anything less than rock solid. There's one part of *Rage 2*'s design that sells it; the collaboration, the concept, all of it. It's the gunplay. Avalanche has dropped into the realms of first-person action with ease, and it has a bright future in this genre if it should feel so emboldened to embrace it.





WHEELS OF STEEL

AVALANCHE EXPLAINS ITS APPROACH TO WASTELAND AUTOMOBILE MAINTENANCE



The original *Rage* offered a selection of off-road monsters and suped-up beasts when it came to vehicle selection, but Avalanche is aiming for something a little more focused, especially since combat from your car is going to be much more intense and involved this time around, which means things like handling have needed a rethink.

"It is different in the sense that the gameplay is focusing on more guns on the vehicles, more explosions and gadgets and more over-the-top stuff like that," says senior game designer Loke Wallmo. "So it does create a different starting point for where you want to go with the vehicles. But we're not really focusing on the vehicles that much."

Presumably to help establish some consistency of experience and allow you to customise how your combat vehicle operates you'll only have the one main car, but you can take a joyride in anything that grabs your fancy. "You will have one major combat vehicle that is engineered for fighting out in the wasteland, but you can drive anything with wheels," confirms Wallmo. "And some other stuff, as well. It's definitely up to you how you want to approach getting around the world and what you wanna do. And those main vehicles that you have are upgradable, you can customise the weapons and loadouts a bit."

When we mentioned the sumptuous weight of the shotgun Willits immediately shot up in excitement, not for the first time in our lengthy chat. "Yeah… id is very particular about the shotgun," Wallmo says, laughing as he attempts to temper the excitable studio head sat to his right. "No, no, no, trust me. We talk about weight *all the time*," Willits explains. "The weight is important – our guns have to feel meaty and powerful."

We ask whether Avalanche felt pressured to get such an iconic weapon – one of the all-time-greats – right; is it aware that fans are going to be scrutinising this thing more than any other weapon included in a videogame? Of course it is. "Here's a great example of our collaboration," says Willits. "Some of our animators look at every single frame of animation on the weapons and where they are in the screen. They see stuff that we don't see. They're like, 'If you move this one frame' – and remember, we have 60 frames in a second and they are dealing with just one frame – 'it'll make it better. Trust me, it will help.'

"And I'm saying, we're all saying, I don't know… I don't see it," Willits continues, laughing, this process clearly a worthwhile labour of love for the folks at id. "But when we spend the time changing it and it's like, 'oh, that feels *much* better!' There's some magic there in the process."

The shotgun isn't the only place where you'll feel a little magic in *Rage 2*. It's an expressive first-person shooter that seems to take great joy in the sheer act of existing. It's furiously fun and surprisingly clever, utilising brutality and violence to push you to experiment with the tight mechanics thrown your way. It's incredibly gory, without making that a part of its personality. It's all played for smiles in a madcap world that's as unrelentingly dangerous as it is gorgeous to behold.

This is what you get when id meets Avalanche: a wonderfully smart single-player FPS that pulls no punches, set in a sprawling open world in which it feels like anything can happen. This is *Rage 2*, the post-apocalyptic game that no shooter fan should pass up.

With its vivid colour palette and irreverent tone, *Rage 2* is a surprisingly fun and evocative shooter that's just positively bursting with personality. If you feel like there's an open-world hole in your heart that Borderlands used to occupy, this is going to be the game for you.



DYING LIGHT 2
HERE COMES THE SUN

TECHLAND OFFERED US THE OPPORTUNITY TO TAKE A BEHIND-THE-SCENES LOOK AT DYING LIGHT 2... AND WE JUMPED AT THE CHANCE

One day, we will look back upon the last decade and come to realise that the greatest trick developers ever pulled was in convincing players that they had any agency over the virtual worlds that they inhabit.

Our fascination with even the most rudimentary inclusion of choice and consequence metrics makes complete sense; we feel empowered when we feel as if we are in control, be it over the direction of a branching narrative or the characters that populate them. But, the truth is, many of the choices that we make in so many videogames are binary. Pick between a thinly veiled Option A and Option B to immediately receive a reward or response. Basic morality systems leave us to deliberate over the concept of right versus wrong in an arena that is free of any real consequence. Systems bend around colour-coded sliders, having only the most tangential impact on the direction of a story or the way in which a game is played. There has to be another way, right? Techland believes that there is.

If you listen to *Dying Light 2*'s producer Kornel Jaskula tell it, the studio has one hell of a pitch for the future of open-world sandbox design. "We believe that *Dying Light 2* is the first game of its type. It's going to be a game where your choices will have genuine consequences, from how the world looks, to how the game plays, to the events that occur throughout the story. This is an open-world game where you should treat the narrative as a gameplay mechanic."

As far as statements of intent go, this one has piqued our interest. The studio is attempting to build a game world that is forever shifting underfoot. Techland has set out to "create a complex matrix" of choices that constantly feeds out into every facet of the game. This is an experience where you will feel the weight of every one of your decisions, each of them reflected in the narrative, game and visual design. "Everything can change," Jaskula teases. "The state of the world is always the result of the decisions that you make. The choices you make allow you to make your own version of this city."

To make this dream a reality, Techland has poured resources into constructing new proprietary technology, a necessary expense (and headache) to engineer something so ambitious. "You could say that it has been quite the challenge," Jaskula laughs. "All of this has forced us to change the technology behind our games. We created a brand new engine – the C-Engine – to support the focus on choice and consequence that runs through the story and the gameplay."

But all of this will be for naught if Techland can't sell the concept of its »





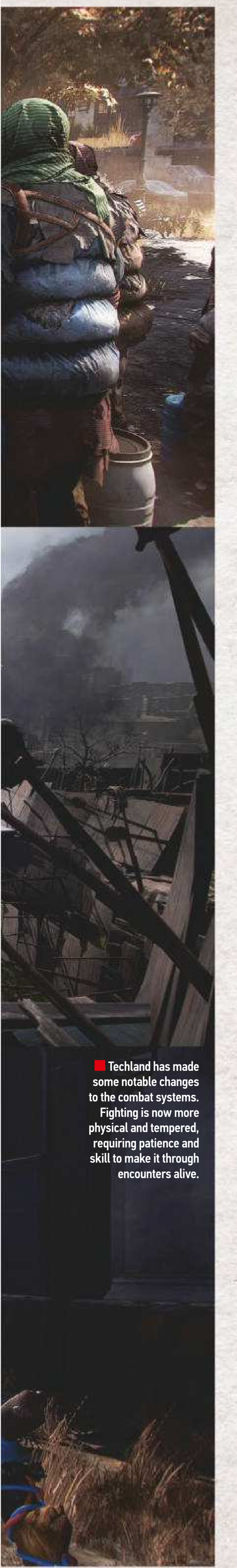
FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT

In *Dying Light*, Techland succeeded where so many others have failed. The studio was able to properly integrate fast and fluid first-person movement systems into its world, giving you the tools and abilities to navigate Harran and avoid enemies with ease. The studio is doubling down on this aspect of the game, offering twice the number of parkour abilities. "You can see the city differently as a parkour player," *Dying Light 2*'s producer Kornel Jaskula tells us. "You can choose any path that you want and we've also added more depth to the parkour itself; while the moves are easy to learn, if you master them you'll be able to zip through the city with ease."

Alongside the improved mobility, Techland is also introducing new parkour attacks and puzzles based around your improved mobility. That last one is important, as it also means that the studio has had to introduce a stamina bar. "In order to reach the top of [some locations] you will have to look at your environment, choose a route you want to follow, and then execute all of your moves while constantly monitoring your stamina. This adds a completely new dimension to parkour. The stamina bar goes down with every move that you make."

Overall, we were impressed by what we saw of the system. It looks more akin to what we hoped to see from *Mirror's Edge Catalyst*. Traversal is fluid and movement is expressive, every action seemed physical and responsive. Given how aware the entire game is to your presence, it makes sense that you should feel properly entrenched in the environment, too.

Dying Light 2 is arriving in 2019 from developer Techland. The studio has set its sights on building an expressive and reactive open world, one that shifts its story and evolves its gameplay opportunities in line with every single one of your actions.



Techland has made some notable changes to the combat systems. Fighting is now more physical and tempered, requiring patience and skill to make it through encounters alive.

'narrative sandbox' to perspective players. The truth is, it's incredibly difficult to demonstrate something so inherently systemic. The entire game is layered in such a way that even the smallest interactions, decisions and actions can feed back into the simulated world at large. If every one of your actions feeds into the wider scope of the story, as well as gameplay opportunities, simultaneously, how do you possibly convey that idea to the players?

The best way to think about the structure, Jaskula suggests, is if you cast it in the context of going rogue with a LEGO set. "The player does have an overall goal in *Dying Light 2*, but it's up to you to decide how you get to it," he says of the overarching narrative, one which sees you charged with trying to locate an object that can potentially turn the tide of the zombie apocalypse in your favour. "It's like having LEGO bricks and being given the goal of building a house. We give you the bricks but not the original set – you don't have the instructions that can take you through it step-by-step. You only have the goal and it's up to you to decide how that house will look by the very end, but it *is* going to be a house. It's up to the player to figure out how the bricks can connect, how they influence one another, and how the building and its interior takes shape..."

As far as analogies go it's admittedly a little messy, but it works. Take the demo shown to the public earlier this year. In it, you'll see a group of smugglers seize control of a water tower in a dilapidated district of the city and begin rationing off resources that are vital to survival. One of the local factions, The Peacekeepers – the last bastion of law and order – send us in to investigate after an emissary goes missing. Assist The Peacekeepers in eliminating the squatters and the area will evolve accordingly as a result, introducing new gameplay and narrative opportunities.

The Peacekeepers may begin to gradually move into the district and bring their considerable wealth and influence with them, which in turn could give you benefits such as free health stations and new traversal options to better assist your movement when night falls. Decline the offer and choose to side with the smugglers, on the other hand, and you'll have to pay for water like everybody else, but you will get a monetary cut of the illegal businesses that begin cropping up in the area and may even see new hubs appear, such as black market retailers selling high-end weapons and rare crafting materials. You could choose to ignore this strand of the game entirely, forcing a whole other set of opportunities to unfurl.

If the choice seems clear-cut on paper, Techland is keen to assure us that this is still a world of grey areas. There are no clear 'right or wrong' decisions; The Peacekeepers are authoritarian by their very nature, so while the area may become more overtly safe – shifting the locations of Dark Zone areas and hordes of zombies, for example – the group *will* begin to crack down on any behaviour that doesn't fall in line with its own. Siding with the smugglers, on the other hand, will turn the district into a criminal den, but it won't be under the iron fist of the government, giving you more freedom to move and space to act as you please.

Every faction in *Dying Light 2* has its own goals and motivations. They have their own enemies, friends and plans for the future. Interfering with any of these elements will have an impact on something else in the city, with the game working behind the scenes to constantly generate new scenarios and world states, all of which will steadily lead you towards the end-game objective. Of course, little of the change in the city will happen overnight. Techland wants the city to feel like a living, breathing space. For this to work, *Dying Light 2* has to feel as if it is being constantly shaped by player-driven decisions, rather than being altered by scripted moments triggered at pivotal points in key quests.

"THIS IS AN OPEN-WORLD GAME WHERE YOU SHOULD TREAT THE NARRATIVE AS A GAMEPLAY MECHANIC"

Some of these changes may be immediately apparent, while others will be smaller and established over time – such as gradual alterations to the topography of the city, a change in population types, or the location of human and zombie enemies, among other things. As we said, every decision yields a different result, and it is only as these outcomes begin to layer up on top of one another that you will begin to see them manifest in the world as completely different combinations of gameplay, story and visual elements. "Changes aren't immediate," Jaskula reaffirms. "They can take some time because these aren't binary changes... when we showed how the vista of the city changed [in the demo] it wasn't based on any one decision, there were many decisions that the player would have to make leading up to that moment and each of those decisions can create something different."

Techland doesn't know exactly how many different branching and divergent paths *Dying Light 2* will have just yet, or if it does it isn't saying. After all, it must be difficult to pinpoint. To support this direction, Techland has had to create, frankly, an incredible amount of content. "We are designing the game with the foundation that some of the players will miss content and we are okay with that," says Jaskula. "It's almost like we are creating several games worth of content right now. But, thanks to the variety of stories, of missions, content and assets, we believe that it will make players want to play the game again and again or try to play with other players in co-op to see their worlds. That's something that we established as a foundation at the very beginning, it's one of our design goals, and it's something that we still keep in mind."

All of this work is being done to give you the opportunity to build your very own world and story within Techland's sandbox. In theory, that means every player's experience will be unique. *Dying Light 2* is designed to increase depth in open-world action adventure games in a way that we haven't quite seen before, and it is purpose built to cause conversation and enact storytelling sessions between friends.

Or, better still, you'll be able to jump into a friend's world and experience it for yourself if you want to. "Of course, *Dying Light 2* will support co-operative gameplay. It's in our DNA," Jaskula confirms, before revealing how the four-player co-op system will bend to each player's unique world state. "Whoever plays the game, it is their game. You can join my game – with your experience, your skills, your equipment – but it's going to by my world, built by my decisions and I'm going to make the decisions that continue to shape it. But I can then join your game and it'll be completely different, with completely different outcomes shaped by your decisions." If you're looking for the word to describe all of this, it's 'wild'.

So what has emboldened Techland to take on such an evolutionary stance to game design? It probably has something to do with the unlikely success of the first *Dying Light*; a game that seemed to arrive out of nowhere, from the ashes of Dead Island, to prove that there was still work to be done in the open-world space yet. In fact, since its release in 2015, *Dying Light* has become something of a cult classic of this generation.

The game may well have eluded the attention of the media for the last three years, but the players have certainly taken notice of Techland's dedication and responded in kind. "We haven't been talking to the media! We have been talking directly to the players, so maybe that's why it has been such a success," he says, laughing. "No, no, the truth is, we have this huge community now. If you compare the original title, when it released three years ago, to how it looks and plays today, it's almost like it's a completely different game. We made a lot of changes and gave it a lot of support – a lot of additional content, most of which was free. That has gotten us a lot of support from the players



Four-player co-op will return, giving you the opportunity to explore new and different worlds alongside your friends.

and we just want to give them more freedom and more of what they want."

We recently had the opportunity to view a fresh behind-closed-doors demonstration of the game in action and we left in awe of what the studio is attempting to put together. It's also given us cause to reflect on the last three years, on the success of *Dying Light* and how that passionate community has pushed the studio to broaden its horizons.

By pouring so much time and energy into supporting *Dying Light*, Techland had the wits to gather key feedback on the minutiae of its creation by entering into an honest and open discussion with the players. The huge variety of content on offer, from smaller-scale DLC such as *Cuisine & Cargo* and *The Bozak Horde*, to larger standalone expansions, such as *The Following* and *Bad Blood*, has effectively given Techland the time and space that it needed to properly process what a full sequel could or should look like in 2019.

As proof of its commitment to this process, Techland even put *Hellraid* on hold back in May of 2015 (much to the dismay of some corners of the community) to focus on serving the burgeoning *Dying Light* community. All told, all of this extra work has been instrumental to get Techland to where it is today. "Our community has a voice," continues Jaskula. "That's why we are still supporting *Dying Light* even now, three years after its premiere. There are still more than half a million players playing the game each week. They have given us a chance to gather important feedback – we are constantly talking to the community. We are getting this feedback from them and we are putting it all into this bold sequel to the original game."

'Bold' barely covers it. While a lot of the studio's creative energy has been focused on creating the engaging, dynamic world and narrative that we've just scratched the surface of, it has also spent considerable time improving upon the core pillars of the original game.

The size of the new urban play area is huge. Remember, *Dying Light* took place over two huge sprawling open-world maps, which was later expanded to a third in *The Following* – which was actually twice the size of the previous two combined. Well, Techland is promising that the new city will be coming in at some four times the size of all three of those maps combined. "Not only is the city bigger at a 2D level, but it's also more vertical – it's higher, you could say, because it's like a European metropolis," says Jaskula of the principal differences between the new city and Harran. "There's also a lot more space to fight on the ground now, especially against human enemies. We needed more space to really challenge the skill of player fighters."

"WE ARE DESIGNING THE GAME WITH THE FOUNDATION THAT SOME OF THE PLAYERS WILL MISS CONTENT - WE'RE OKAY WITH THAT"

Movement has been entirely overhauled, with *Dying Light*'s famously slick traversal now made even better by the inclusion of double the number of parkour moves – navigating this open world should be an expression, Jaskula tell us. As too should the technical combat, with Techland pushing to ensure that its robust melee, weapon crafting and AI systems work in tandem to create memorable and engaging experiences.

This, we're told, is a perfect example of how feedback has influenced the development of *Dying Light 2*. "We've been watching a lot of PvP matches of *Dying Light* to influence our direction. We observe how the players behave and react to each other's actions, and," Jaskula explains, "we are creating our AI systems to be as reflective of real players in PvP matches as possible. We want you to feel like you are fighting real players instead of AI."

Combat is heavier and more deliberate as a result. Encounters with battle-hardened human survivors – *Dying Light 2* takes place 15 years after the original infection, this city is the last that humanity has – will now be real challenges to survive. Enemies fight smart and look to overwhelm, pushing you to block, dodge and work for your openings. If that should fail, you'll now be able to unleash parkour attacks, allowing you to traverse more aggressively than before or utilise physical objects in the world as part of your combat strategies. And should *that* fail, well, you'll still be able to add a litany of ridiculous makeshift improvements to your weaponry – the studio estimates that more than 50 new customisable effects can be added to your custom builds.

This is still just scratching the surface of *Dying Light 2*. The day and night cycle has been completely re-worked, as too has the artificial intelligence of the infected and the general progression systems. All of this is impressive, but we're still struggling to pull our attention from what it is trying to achieve with its intertwined story and gameplay.

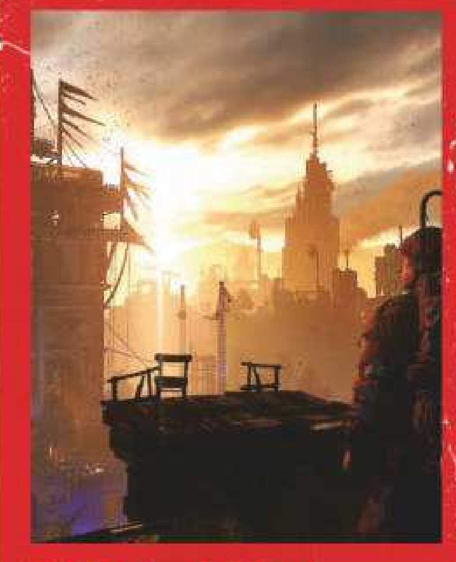
Dying Light 2 is first and foremost an open-world action game, there's no doubting that. Its fast and ferocious, a game that still derives real joy out of its free-flowing movement systems and kinetic combat. But it's an action game that draws from RPGs in a way that we weren't expecting. This isn't about micro-managing stats or skill trees, nor is it concerned with having you pick through rudimentary dialogue choices or in making you sit back and watch as a game reacts and shifts to your decisions in a cutscene. *Dying Light 2* treats its narrative design the same as it does its gameplay – this is a sandbox, a true sandbox. It's a game about choice and expression, about feeling like you're in full control of your character and their destiny, in a world that is constantly reflecting your successes and failures, no matter how large or small they may be.

It can be easy to scoff when Techland announces that *Dying Light 2* might indeed be the "first game of its type". But after seeing it in action, after speaking with the team working so diligently behind the scenes, we're honestly struggling to find ways to argue with the assertion.

To help support its ambitious new narrative sandbox experience, Techland has brought Chris Avellone into the fold, alongside a host of other famed RPG writers such as former CD Projekt RED employee Karolina Stachyra – the scribe responsible for *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*'s infamous Bloody Baron quest line.

Dying Light 2 will introduce a stamina system that will impact everything in the game, from parkour to combat to sprinting. While it might sound restrictive, the only time we really saw this come into play was in the new parkour challenges.





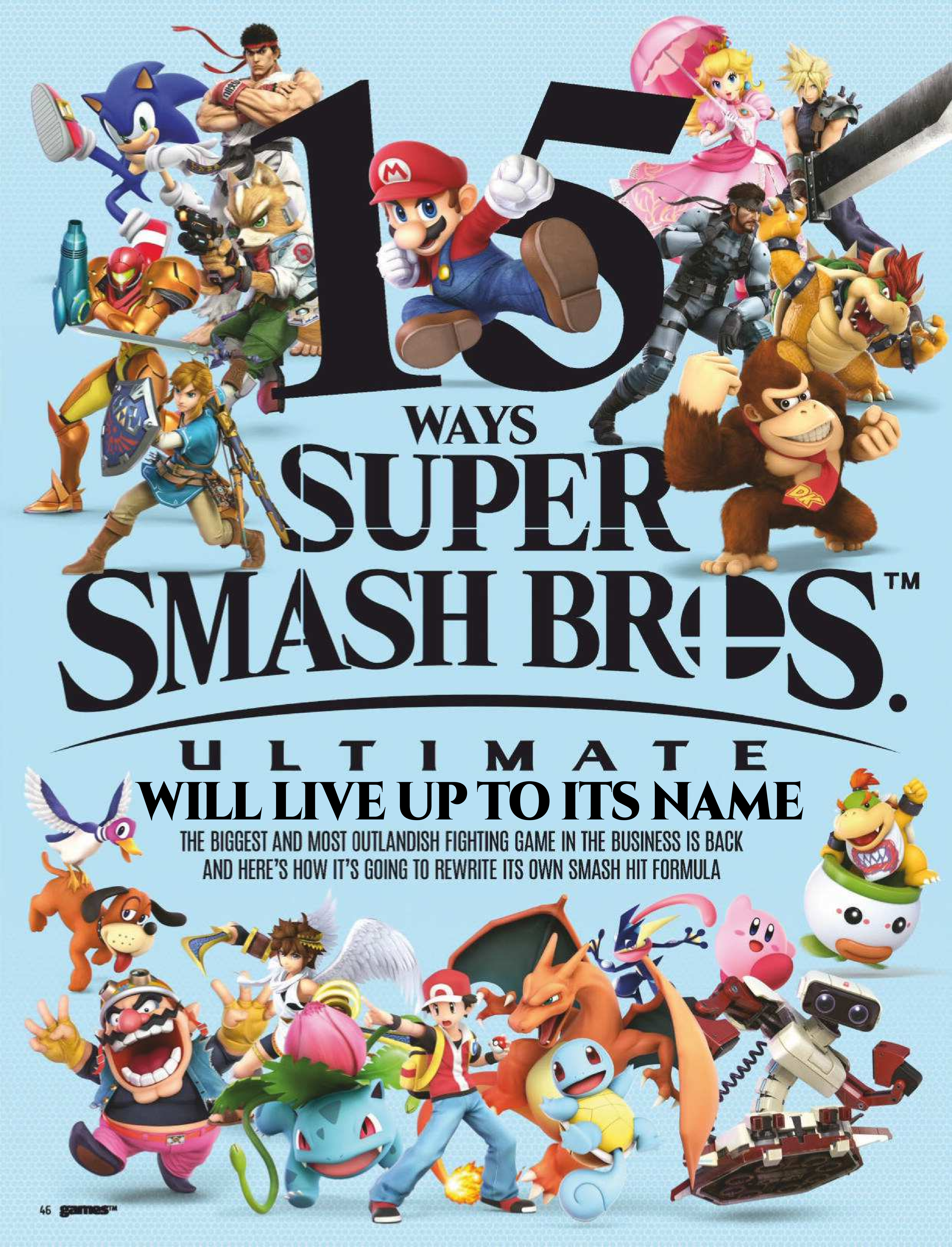
IN THE DEAD OF NIGHT

While we have largely focused on the choices and consequences that will come to define *Dying Light 2* as an experience, we did want to take a second to pause on the game's balance between human and infected antagonists. Zombies are of course returning, though they seem to have less of a presence in the new city space than they did in Harran. This is largely done to reflect some changes made to the day/night cycle. It's as Kornel Jaskula tells us, "We changed our philosophy a little bit. It's not only about the infected in this game, it's also about humans; the daytime is for humans, but the night for the infected."

When the sun is shining, you will be dealing with quests across the city and squabbling with other human characters, though you can go looking for infected if you want to. During the day, zombies take shelter in darkened buildings, dangerous nests that contain good loot should you make it through the bundles of powerful infected without stirring the hive. When the sun sets, however, then it's time to try to survive against the unending horde. And we say try, because night is truly going to be a terror this time around. Techland is overhauling the infected AI, introducing new independent and group routines to lead to more complex behaviour patterns from the zombies.



This game is set 15 years after the original *Dying Light*, in the last city that humanity has to call its own. There's a much larger focus on human antagonists this time around, but the infected will still be a constant threat, particularly as night falls.



15 WAYS SUPER SMASH BROS.™ ULTIMATE WILL LIVE UP TO ITS NAME

THE BIGGEST AND MOST OUTLANDISH FIGHTING GAME IN THE BUSINESS IS BACK AND HERE'S HOW IT'S GOING TO REWRITE ITS OWN SMASH HIT FORMULA



1 EVERYONE IS HERE!

When series director - and *Smash* overlord - Masahiro Sakurai tells you that 'Everyone is here!' he's definitely not being cavalier with the hyperbole. If the character has appeared in any other version of the game, you can bet your life they're going to appear in the latest instalment in the series. It's not called *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate* for nothing.

As of writing, there are 74 characters confirmed thus far, drawing from series favourites right through to the most obscure fighters to ever air dash for glory. Solid Snake will be making his return alongside Wolf from Starfox, while the Inklings from the Splatoon series and Simon and Richter Belmont of Castlevania fame prepare to lob paint and crack whips. There's also a huge selection of Echo Fighters including Princess Daisy, Dark Pit and Lucina.



2 IT'S NOTICEABLY FASTER THAN SMASH 4

If you've ever played a game of Smash Bros. - or just sat back and watched the action unfold as a spectator - you'll know it's always a fast and action-packed experience. But, if you've played most, if not all, of the entries in the series you'll know certain instalments have a slightly faster or slower pace than others. *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate* is no exception so veterans Smash fans will need to adjust to the new pace.

Noticeably faster than *Super Smash Bros. for Wii U*/*Super Smash Bros. for 3DS* (or *Smash 4* as it's known to its friends), but significantly slower than *Super Smash Bros. Melee*, it's clear Sakurai-san and the rest of the team are trying to find a middle ground that's far more palatable to new players yet fast enough to coax in the competitive players who have stood resolutely to *Melee* for so long.

3 IT SUPPORTS GAMECUBE CONTROLLERS

If you've not played *Smash Bros.* in a while - or you've never tried the series at all - it might sound a little bit crazy to hear the latest entry will officially support controllers for a 17-year-old console, but the competitive scene around this crossover beat-'em-up series has never been anything close to normal. Since *Super Smash Bros. Melee* is considered the pinnacle of the series (well, at least for the moment), players who compete in tournaments almost exclusively use GameCube controllers.

Yes, it's an ugly controller and a far cry from the ergonomic chunks of plastic we're used to today, but it's mish-mash of buttons perfectly suits the series' inputs and its remained the standard ever since. So you'll be able to buy an adaptor that'll connect up your GC controller to your Switch, or you can buy a brand new *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate* branded one to show off your devotion to the cause. »









4 SMASHDOWN MODE IS ALL ABOUT MAINING MULTIPLE FIGHTERS

When it comes to fighting games, it's all about learning the ins and outs of one character so you can take them online and show just how in-sync you are with your virtual competitor. 'Maining' certain characters is just as important in *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate*, but a brand new mode will force you to adapt and excel with more than one fighter. Smashdown lets you pick your favourite character as normal, but when that rounds ends, you'll no longer be able to select them.

It's bound to be a big hit with casual players as it's a great way to test your skills with new characters or ones you would almost always never choose. It's certainly not going to appeal to esports players or budding pros, but we can see this mode becoming a must-play experience when someone breaks out their Switch at a party.



There have been many imitators but there is simply nothing like the mayhem of Smash in full flow.



5 THERE'S ALMOST DOUBLE THE STAGES OF THE PREVIOUS SMASH

It isn't just the roster that's had its number skyrocketed for *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate*, stages have also been upped to the max. This instalment includes over 100 individual stages (103, to be exact) and they're drawing from the vast Nintendo first-party and third-party franchises this crossover brawler boasts right out of the box.

This entry will draw on plenty of past stages (expect fan favourites such as Luigi's Mansion, Kongo's Jungle and Saffron City to make an appearance), but you'll also have access to four new stages, including Dracula's Castle (Castlevania), New Donk City (*Super Mario Odyssey*), Moray Tower (*Splatoon*) and the Great Plateau Tower (*The Legend of Zelda: Breath Of The Wild*).

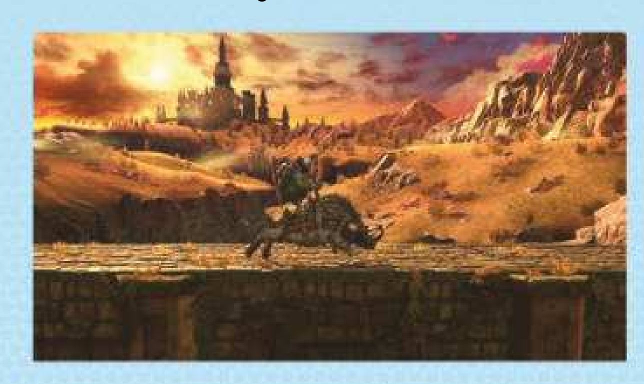
Interestingly, Nintendo has made sure every single one of those 103 stages will be large enough to support eight-player battles, so you can be sure you can show off your best air dashing moves while playing in your favourite stage.



6 YOU CAN ACCESS OMEGA AND BATTLEFIELD VERSIONS OF EVERY STAGE

So we know we're getting well over 100 hundred stages to choose from, but Nintendo isn't done there. Each stage has two further versions, to choose from, so technically you're getting over 300 variants to play with - no other fighting game can claim that amount of choice. First off you can play any stage in Battlefield form (first introduced in *Super Smash Bros. 64*) with plenty of platforms and points of elevation, making for a fitting place to take down your opponents.

Then there's the Omega form, a popular iteration that turns each stage into a 'Final Destination' fitting for an all-out brawl. These versions are all about taking away the platforms and forcing players into closer proximity, so expect to see New Donk City and other brand new stages like never before.

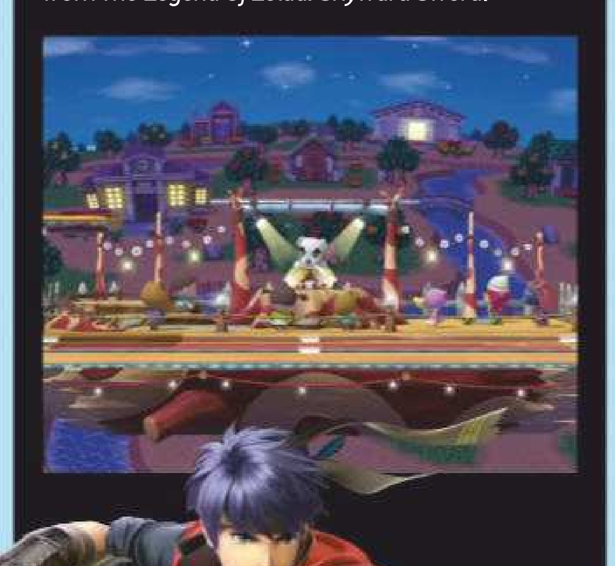




7 STAGES CAN MORPH INTO ONE ANOTHER

So there are over 100 stages and over 300 variants thanks to Battlefield and Omega forms, but Nintendo isn't stopping there. Stage Morph is the latest addition to the fold, and it's going to make every battle even more exciting. So now you can adjust the rules of each match so the stage will transition from one setting to another, all while you and your friends/enemies are doing battle. It looks amazing the first time you see it, and provides a dynamic backdrop for these madcap fights.

So you might be battling in the caverns of Brinstar from the *Metroid* games, only for the transition to be triggered, and now the screen and the platforms rush into the air and you're suddenly making colourful war amid the clouds in Skyloft from *The Legend Of Zelda: Skyward Sword*.





8 DASH CANCELLING IS BACK

Speed and positioning play a huge part in how a match unfolds in the Smash series, and since the action can often be so unpredictable, you're often having to change your tactics on the fly. So being able to stop a move part way through its animation - such as speeding up for a dash - is incredibly important. And Nintendo has once again listened to its fanbase, because it's re-introducing the ability to dash cancel.

Closing the distance on one opponent will enable you to get up close and perform a powerful Final Smash, but you might need to readjust your plans when another player begins attacking you from behind. Being able perform a jump or short hop to opt out of the move means you're only a short burst of animations away from redirecting your offence elsewhere and causing some hurt.



9 FINAL SMASHES ARE MUCH SHORTER

Super Smash Bros. has also embraced its unique brand of colourful theatrics, but in the world of esports and tournament-based play, overly long Final Smash sequences can really break the intensity of a match. With Nintendo hoping to nurture the competitive nature the series has quietly built around itself, *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate* will ship with Final Smash moves that have noticeably shorter animation phases.

This means you can still turn the tide of a match, or cement your chokehold on the lead, with a unique special move and avoid taking everyone out of the moment. You can now return the action faster, and some Final Smash sequences have been completely redone in order to maintain this new streamlined approach across the entire roster. Esports players will love it, but it's an important adjustment that will benefit even the most casual of Smash users. »



The roster of *Smash Ultimate* is obviously gigantic and only reminds us just how insane this series has been.



10

PERFECT SHIELD TURNS DEFENCE INTO OFFENCE

The concept of a Perfect Shield (or a Powershield as it's something known) has been around for years, and Nintendo has made a point of adjusting how this mechanic is used as a defensive manoeuvre. In previous games, a Perfect Shield worked more like a parry, requiring you to bring the move into effect within four frames of your opponent's attack. For *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate*, it's all about releasing the shield on impact.

Pull it off right and your character will flash, forcing your foe into a brief moment of 'hitlag' (where their character is stunned for a few frames) enabling you to get in a counterattack that could prove the turning point in a match. It's proved a massive hit with players, and is just one of a number of new changes that's helping this latest Smash live up that 'Ultimate' moniker.





11

UTILISE AIR ATTACKS ON THE GROUND

Much of Smash's appeal comes from the aerial mayhem each round inevitability delivers, but knowing how to fight when your feet are on the ground can be just as important. *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate* re-addresses this by offering up an updated version of the Short Hop.

As its name so cryptically suggests, the Short Hop is a shorter version of your regular jump, and is there to help you connect air-based attacks with opponents who are on the ground.

For a game all about using elevation, it's a neat way to give you more options when grounded. By pressing 'A' partway into a jump, it's also a much easier and versatile mechanic to utilise and it's already proved very popular with competitive players who want that extra edge when battling on the ground.





12

1v1 MATCHES FINISH FASTER THANKS TO HIGHER DAMAGE OUTPUT

You can take on friends and strangers in all manner of setups - all the way up to eight-player throwdowns - but that doesn't mean you can't follow a more traditional route and take on another Smash user one-on-one. However, doing so in previous entries in the series would often lead to painfully long matches with only two players involved.

In order to address this, damage output will be increased depending on the number of characters taking part in a given bout. The idea here is each strike - from a basic punch to a Final Smash - will inflict far more damage, enabling you to finish matches at a much faster rate. It's a neat approach Smash fans have been crying out for, so it's great to see Nintendo making the change for *Ultimate*.



Every stage that has ever appeared in the Smash series is being beautifully recreated and rendered for the Switch.

13

BOSSES ARE BACK TO CAUSE TROUBLE

Giant bosses have become a staple of the single-player portion of the Smash games, and *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate* isn't going to be breaking that tradition. This new entry will feature many of the classic big bads of old, including Yellow Devil (from the Mega Man series), Dark Emperor (from *Find Mii*) and Metal Face (from the Xenoblade games), but there's also some new faces looking to cause you grief.

Nintendo has confirmed that Dracula will be making his way into *Ultimate* all the way from the Castlevania franchise, including a variant on Dracula's Castle as an arena. He'll be joined by Rathalos, the giant fire-breathing dragon monster from Monster Hunter. There's no word yet on which arena this intimidating beastie will be occupying, but expect it to tie into Capcom's classic series with Smash's usual authenticity.





■ Some changes to damage in one-on-one combat should mean that it is a much more viable and faster-paced way of enjoying Smash.

14

ALL THE ECHO FIGHTERS YOU COULD EVER NEED

If you're new to the Smash series, Echo Fighters offer more than an alternative skin to some of your favourite characters. They're a 'clone' with the same moveset as a particular character, only with a completely different look and some changes to the effects of said attacks. These clones have been in the franchise for years, and Nintendo is doubling down on them for *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate*.

The game will launch with six Echo Fighters, including Daisy (based off Peach), Lucina (styled on Marth), Richter Belmont (inspired by Simon Belmont), Chrom (based off Roy) and Dark Pit and Dark Samus (who are, unsurprisingly, darker versions of Pit and Samus). It might seem like a cheap way to bump up the roster, but much like the Omega and Battlefield versions of each stage, this is Nintendo giving you more options and variants for your money.

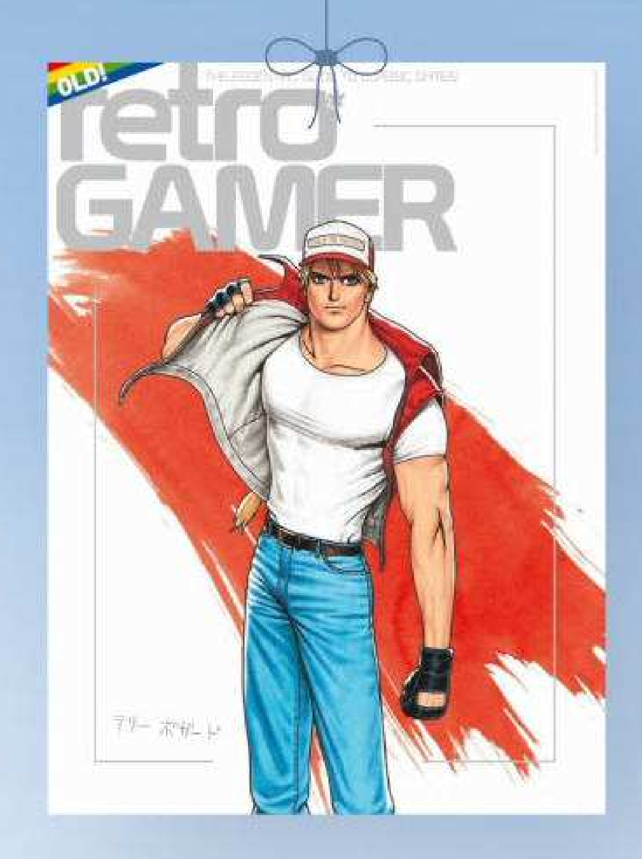
15

DIRECTIONAL AIR DODGES ARE BACK

Directional Air Dodges (first introduced in *Melee*) make a return in *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate*, although Nintendo has given them something of an overhaul for this latest entry. So when you perform an Air Dodge (ideal for closing the distance or creating it) you'll know have the ability to make an additional short dash in one of four directions for a little extra manoeuvrability.

However, opting to use this extra dash will put you into freefall as soon as the animation is finished so you'll have to weigh up whether moving across a larger distance is worth the brief moment of vulnerability. You can also perform an Air Dodge without using this extra dash, so you don't have to force yourself into this sticky situation if you don't want to.

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Cyberpunk 2077

WE SIT DOWN WITH CD PROJEKT RED TO DISCUSS THE FUTURE OF INTERACTIVE ENTERTAINMENT

We are locked in a room with Patrick Mills, arguing about the bathroom facilities installed around Night City. In 30 minutes an alarm will sound, interrupting us; the windows of the room will polarise, flooding it with artificial light; the door will swing open and we will be ushered out into the world, left to contemplate all that we had seen and heard on one of the industry's most anticipated upcoming releases. And here we are, arguing lavatory semantics with one of CD Projekt Red's quest designers.

But let's back up for a minute. It's important for you to understand how we got here before we can take you any further. We had just spent the better part of an hour utterly entranced, watching with baited breath as the future of interactive entertainment flashed before our eyes; a fresh look at *Cyberpunk 2077*, one that is yet to be revealed to the public.

Given the ambition behind the damned thing, perhaps it's no surprise that every developer, publisher and journalist in the room walked away with wildly different reactions and interpretations to what they had seen. Some are in a state of shock, convinced that they had just bore witness to an early glimpse at the next generation of gaming. Others are in awe, mesmerised by the scope of the vision and mastery of the execution. Many are steadfast in their concern over the depiction of minority voices and presentation of 'mature' content. A handful are, frankly, unconvinced that the demonstration was little more than an in-engine exercise in smoke and mirrors. That's an opinion that is tempered only by the actions of the developer controlling the action – he was sandwiched in among the audience, occasionally making unintended movements with the character as the small crowd hustled either side of him to make notes throughout.

Truth be told, we felt all of this. It was swirling around in our head, percolating as we sat down across from Patrick Mills, a veteran quest designer of CD Projekt Red. As we tried to make sense of it all one thing became perfectly clear, that for better or worse, the studio is working to create something that far outstretches our understanding of what a first-person RPG, in the traditional sense, can be – even if the studio is hesitant to admit it.

"*Cyberpunk 2077* is *not* an immersive sim, but there is a lot of influence in there from those types of games…" Mills will tell us with a smile as we begin to probe the scope of the studio's ambition. As far as denials go, we're not buying it, and you shouldn't either; *Cyberpunk 2077* has the potential to be genuinely evolutionary. You may be wondering why we believe that it is important whether or not the game is classified as an immersive sim or not. Thankfully, we're here to help you navigate through this minefield of delineations.

When Mills mentions "those games" he's referring to the likes of BioShock, Dishonored, Deus Ex, Prey and System Shock. The aforementioned are but a handful of series' in existence that have the capacity to transcend genre entirely, existing instead within the illusive bracketing of the 'immersive sim'.

The immersive sim is not a genre, per se. It's a malleable collection of unwritten design directives that a few games, largely driven by the alumni of Looking Glass Studios, follow to help propagate a certain sense of expression and immersion within their worlds. Design that is heavily focused on creating gameplay that will provide a player with a vast array of different opportunities to complete objectives and overcome challenges.

This is achieved through a vast array of interactive tools and in the manipulation of a complex web of systems, all of which are designed to interplay with one another in a way that feels logical to the world that they unfurl within. That world and all of the levels contained within it are designed to be simultaneously functional and atmospheric, purpose-built to support choice-driven gameplay in spaces that feel believable, *real*. All of this grounded and bound within a narrative that tackles difficult and mature themes by way of means that would be considered unconventional to the standards of the wider industry. Does that sound a little like a certain upcoming open-world first-person RPG to you? »



A CONSTANT CHALLENGE

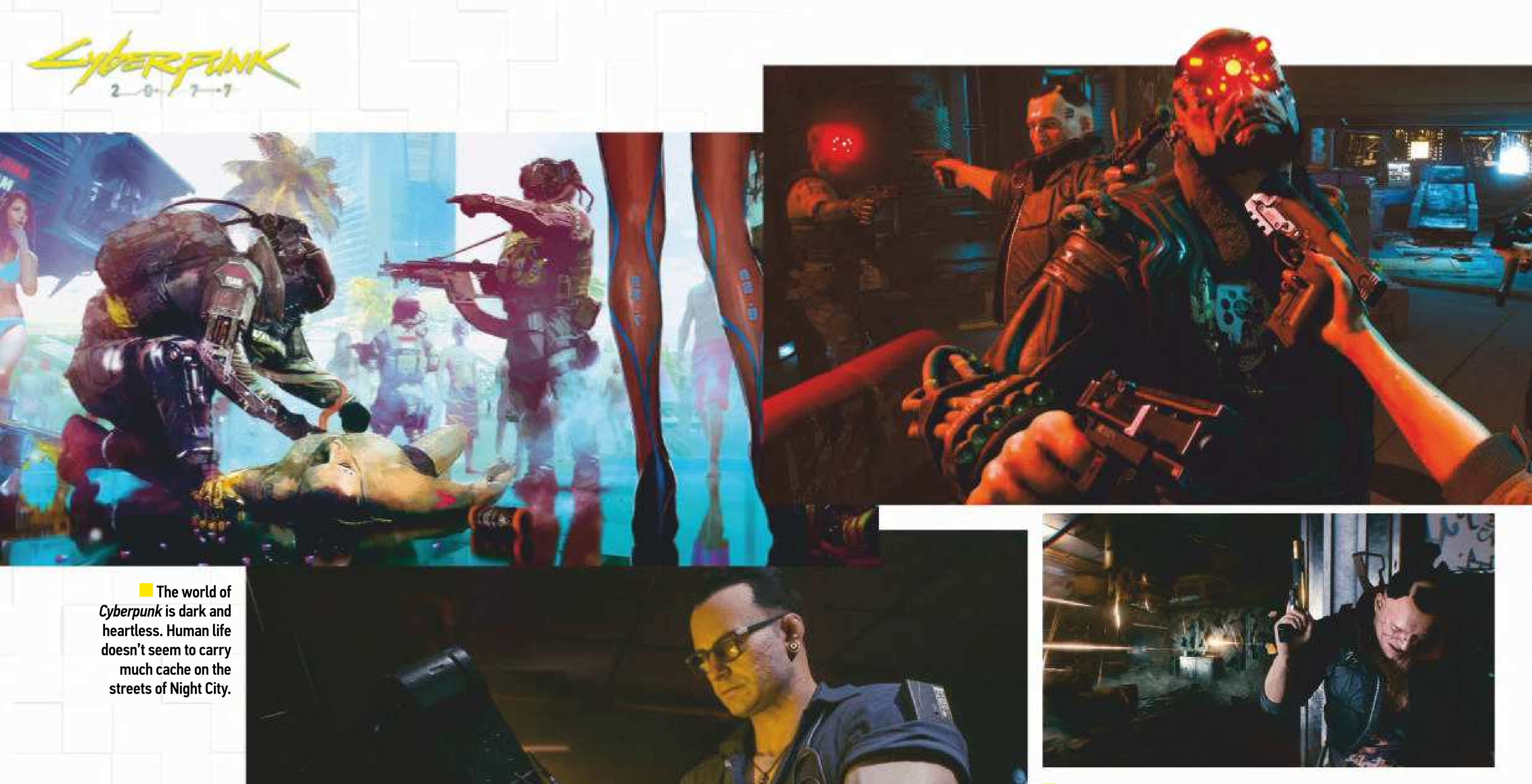
HOW DIFFICULT IS IT TO IMPLEMENT QUESTS IN A GAME OF THIS SCALE?

Patrick Mills has been working at CD Projekt Red for over six years, starting his career at the studio on *Cyberpunk 2077* before later moving on to working on *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* as the studio pushed all resources into finishing the game. Mills has first-hand experience on how difficult it can be to implement quests into a game such as *The Witcher 3* or *Cyberpunk 2077*, particularly in an environment where the shape of it is always shifting. "How long to implement? Wow… the entire one of the project! It's rare that you finish a quest, put it aside and then you don't have to work on it anymore," Mills tells us, the exhaustion creeping into his voice at the mere thought of it.

"You're constantly adding things and taking things out. One of the things about quest design is that, very often, you are having to make things work that don't work yet, and so you have to go and you have to build something temporary."

An example Mills gives us is from an instance in *The Witcher 3*, where a particular system wasn't ready and yet the team had to go ahead and build around that fact. It sounds like a nightmare. "There was a thing in *Witcher* where you're supposed to ride your horse and attack somebody while riding it… horse riding didn't work at the time, and since horse riding didn't work, you definitely couldn't fight on the back of a horse," says Mills, noting that this is common practice in the industry, where you know you are going to get something but the timeframe is often shifting. "We had to go through a lot of work to fake that. That takes two weeks to create so you can continue working and then, eventually, you get the actual system; in an ideal world you'd take the fake thing out and put the new system in. It never works that way."

"What happens is you take your thing out and you put the new thing in and then a dozen other things break because they relied on the fake thing that you put in. That type of thing happens right up to the end of the project, right," Mills tells us, laughing. "Even in the patch process, you're still constantly tweaking things. To be honest, I'm feeling daunted even talking about it."



The world of *Cyberpunk* is dark and heartless. Human life doesn't seem to carry much cache on the streets of Night City.

From the missions we've witness thus far it is clear that multiple conclusions and results can be achieved depending on choices before and during encounters with NPCs.

If history has proven anything, it's that the immersive sims are creatively ambitious, critically acclaimed titles that have consistently failed to attract a broad enough audience to be considered commercially viable. Perhaps that's why CDPR is uneasy about the grouping… then again, perhaps it truly believes that it falls short of being put under the moniker. Still, the ambition and acclaim is such that the impact of these few games continues to reverberate, broadly influencing the action, adventure and role-playing genres and the games that exist within them. *Cyberpunk 2077* is no exception.

That, at least, is a sentiment we can get Mills to agree with. "We looked to a lot of immersive sims for inspiration, particularly among the quest team. A lot of us are really into these games, myself being one of them. They [CDPR] would be upset if I mentioned specific ones…" he trails off, whispering "*Prey* is great; it is *so* good" as we both begin to laugh. "But, *yeah*, we've taken a lot of inspiration from the immersive sim games and I think you'll be able to see that reflected in the final experience. It's *not* an immersive sim, but there is a lot of influence from those types of games."

"Do the bathrooms work?" we immediately counter. But let's pause for another minute before we let Mills answer, because this question isn't as innocuous as it may at once seem. As any connoisseur of the immersive sim will know, there are two hallmarks of the type that have stood the test of time. The first is the continued reappearance of a certain key-code combination, and the second is with respect to the bathrooms. It costs a studio time and resources to produce functioning facilities, despite the fact that they serve no obvious benefit to the game. So, why bother?

It's because a bathroom is something we at once understand the purpose of, no matter the setting; it's a room that features an array of interactive elements that can at once work to establish the perceived realness of a game world – willing you into the mindset that the game is a truly functional, operational space. A bathroom can establish the illusion of realism better than almost any other tool – if the toilet and sink work in a game, why wouldn't (or couldn't) everything else? So, we insist, "Do the bathrooms work?"

"Erm, yeah! Actually, they do," Mills exclaims, excitedly. "If you go into V's apartment you can turn on the water, you can flush the toilet and you can turn on the shower… yeah." So, we conclude; it's an immersive sim then? "Yeah, there you go," he laughs, throwing his hands into the air, his tone tinged with defeatist sarcasm. "It is an immersive sim."

We weren't convinced he was being forthcoming. We doubled down on what we considered to, at the very least, be a missed opportunity to pay a little homage to the past. In V's apartment there's a weapon's locker, one that required a key-code combination to enter… "It didn't say 0451, it *did not* say 0451," he interjects, laughing; he already had that classic code committed to memory. We are finally getting somewhere. "But I'm not promising that there won't be keypads that say 0451…"

"You know what? We're not making it [*Cyberpunk 2077*] an immersive sim, but if when this game comes out it gets called 'the first open-world immersive sim,' I would love that. That would be wonderful. But that's not what we're making… but it is going to be similar."

"IF WHEN THIS GAME COMES OUT IT GETS CALLED 'THE FIRST OPEN-WORLD IMMERSIVE SIM,' I WOULD LOVE THAT"

PATRICK MILLS,
QUEST DESIGNER, CDPR



You know you're living in a bad neighbourhood when the local medical team arrives with automatic weapons raised and ready to fire.

There are some elements of *Cyberpunk 2077* we haven't had a chance to fully explore, but are really looking forward to, like the game's soundtrack.

We truly believe that *Cyberpunk 2077* has the capacity to be something truly special. CD Project Red has built an environment out of Night City that feels truly alive. It has the potential to stand as the most believable city we have ever seen in an open-world game. The level of depth, choice, immersion and expression that could be offered through *Cyberpunk*'s blurring of tools and systems, through its unbelievably deep class system and dizzying adaptive narrative, will be awe inspiring. It's the sort of impact that the immersive sim games are renowned for having, games that subvert their intended genres to push for new degrees of interaction and immersion and this game is doing it on an even bigger scale.

Still, Mills is pretty clear as to where *Cyberpunk 2077* draws its line, pulling it out of the realm of being considered the first open-world immersive sim. "We are going to offer lots and lots *and lots* of choices across the game. There's going to be a lot of choice and consequence. You are going to see a lot of that DNA in there; its going to be in there," he maintains. "What we are probably not going to have, at least across the board, is the level of exploration freedom that often comes with immersive sims, because we do have to scope somewhere," he adds.

That comment piqued our interest. "…we do have to scope somewhere."

You've no doubt seen the 48 minutes of gameplay by now – if not go check it out immediately – and you are now likely asking the same question that we are. Just how far does CD Projekt Red's ambition stretch, and what exactly would hold it back from becoming something more than an elaborate RPG?

In our time with Mills we discovered that it is in fact the quest design where so much of the studio's scope is tied up. "Our philosophy is that if the player should logically be able to do something – if the character would logically be able to do it – then you should be able to do it in the game."

"Obviously," he continues, treading lightly, only too aware that the question of logic-based mission design is one inherently tied to the immersive sim, particularly as the scope far outstretches that of *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* in this regard. "We can't provide for every contingency and every option, but we want to provide enough of them to give you a robust suite of choices."

The problem here for CDPR is that *Cyberpunk* offers a truly impressive degree of opportunity to craft your avatar and shape your identity in Night City. Ensuring that every element of the game's quest ties back to this philosophy clashes directly with the fluid class system. That element of the game effectively allows for an unruly number of combinations to be made to your avatar at all times throughout the game, each of which have to be accounted for in some way in every quest line ncluded in the game – no matter how big or how small, important or otherwise incidental. "We have to make sure that anybody can get through them. So we have to consider, 'Okay, what if I'm coming into a quest and I haven't spent any skill points and I've purchased no upgrades… can I get through it?' Yeah… you have to be able to play it that way. QA is enormous," Mills tells us, exacerbated by the thought of it, noting how the team will often





CD Projekt Red has done an incredible job of bringing the look of concept art like this to life in the game itself. It buzzes with colour and malice.

It's going to be interesting to see how V, your player character, can play off different groups and factions against one another through the story.

While the game world of Night City doesn't appear to cover as much ground as *The Witcher 3*, it's still more than big enough to warrant speeding around in this beauty.

In the land of the mechanically sighted, the merc with the military grade optician is king… or something to that effect. Anyway, upgrades are important. Remember that.

come back with feedback that will cause huge structural problems for others to deal with: "They'll say, 'This player can't make it through the quest. So you need to fix it, you need to add a new option.' There's a lot of play testing and lots of iteration."

How does Mills feel about such a process? "Sometimes this can be very frustrating," he tells us, laughing. "Okay, so say you have an option in a quest and maybe you'll think, 'Okay, well, I have option A and option B, but shouldn't I also be able to do this? Where is Option C?' If, logically, there is a reason to have another path it really should be there."

The problem with designing a game such as this is that making changes isn't easy. CDPR isn't altering binary choices in a branching narrative, but fundamental parts of quest structures and level designs. If elements of the game don't match the core philosophy once they have been implemented into the engine, if the fluid class system throws a bloody huge wrench into the system, it will need to be addressed, and quick. "But if we add in C maybe we are going to have to change A and B," he continues. "We might even have to cut A entirely and replace it with D… sometimes we can just say 'that door is locked in, you can't go in there', and then maybe Option C isn't a consideration and we solve the problems… but other times we are going to be like, well, okay, we are going to have to go through this and start getting rid of options and changing paths. Look, it's all very complicated."

It does sound very complicated. This is probably why there aren't more immersive sims in the world. This is also likely the reason why studios aren't pouring resources into creating an open-world RPG to the scope of *Cyberpunk 2077*, let alone anything even more reactive to player choice. It's complicated, a design process littered with near-constant roadblocks. That said, it's overcoming problems like this that makes the job fun for designers like Mills. "I heard someone earlier describe it as like trying to put a jigsaw puzzle together once, and I think that's right. Only the pieces keep changing shape as you place more of them down, and then it just keeps falling apart but you still have to do it and, eventually, hopefully, you wind up with something that makes sense and is coherent," he says, adding: "It is a lot of work. It requires a lot of revision, but it's worth it."

As our time comes to a close with Mills, as we are escorted out of our interview and thrust back into the world with countless conflicting opinions whirling around our head, the only thing we can really make sense of is this: *Cyberpunk 2077* is going to be something special. It's a game that seems to constantly impress the more you examine it, the further you delve into the detail carved into every inch of the game's content, assets, systems, mechanics and presentation. It might not be an immersive sim in the traditional sense – it may not let players run totally rampant across Night City – but it's clearly on track to far surpass the traditional boundaries of an open-world RPG. This is a game with a beating heart, with true choice and consequence pumping through its veins, and we can't wait to get our hands on this colossal vision for the future of gaming, whenever that should be. But you know what, we're willing to wait a lifetime for the opportunity.



THIS IS (NOT) A GOLF GAME





RUNE K DREWSEN OF TRIBAND TALKS US THROUGH THE CREATION OF THIS GENERATION'S STRANGEST SPORTS GAME, WHAT THE GOLF?

There's a growing band of indie game makers who are looking to break free of the constraints of genre convention, free of the pressures of hardware optimisation and, most importantly, free of the shackles of any kind of natural law of logic. These are developers who want to create something silly. Something absurd. Something strange. And at the forefront of that push right now is Triband from Denmark with *What The Golf?* scheduled for release in 2019.

"Our goal from the beginning was always to make something that was out there and to push the barrier in what computers games could do," Triband co-founder and COO Rune K Drewsen tells us. "When we start on a project, we strive to make people who play it feel like 'why didn't I come up with that?'"

Triband's story is a peculiar one in some respects, but perhaps not so unfamiliar. It was founded by Drewsen along with Peter Bruun and Tim Garbos. Drewsen comes from an advertising background, and met developers Bruun and Garbos while working in an old school in the heart of Copenhagen run by a feminist art collective. It was seeing how the game developers were interacting with each other and sharing expertise that drew Drewsen in. "I've only been in the game business for three years, and one of the things that got me excited about this business in the first place was actually the shared sense of community that we especially have here in the Scandinavian countries," he explains. "When I first saw this I was very excited because I have a background in advertising, and in advertising everyone is competing with everybody, even within the office. Everybody is the best at everything. When you leave the company you try and get so many of the clients to follow you over to a new company, and everybody is claiming that they're the best at everything. And it's kind of tiring. When I saw this hospitality or shared community feeling or whatever you would call it, I was really excited and thought 'Wow, I need to switch now, because this is just amazing'."

> "WHEN WE START ON A PROJECT WE STRIVE TO MAKE PEOPLE WHO PLAY IT FEEL LIKE 'WHY DIDN'T I COME UP WITH THAT?'"

And so, as Drewsen explained at the start, the mission was put in place to try to surprise and push beyond the conventional thinking. This was certainly evident in Triband's debut game *Keyboard Sports*. This mixture of sports and point and click control used the entirety of the keyboard with it all displayed on screen, and with your character moving to whatever key you pressed. It was a pretty innovative take on using the keyboard as a controller. "We felt it was a shame that everybody had this awesome game controller in front of them and everybody was only using like four keys," Drewsen tells us. "We really wanted to make a game that used all of the keys, even the 'taboo' keys like Home and Escape, those keys that you never get to press. The idea was really that when people sat down in front of *Keyboard Sports* they should have that feeling that you have as a kid when you see a keyboard for the first time and »

you just press all of the buttons and the typewriter or computer or whatever it is, makes inputs and you're amazed by it."

It holds up very well, and captures the spirit of what Triband is trying to achieve, turning conventions on their head, rethinking norms, but also working within recognisable fields, so as not to scare too many people away. "I think the good thing about both *Keyboard Sports* and *What The Golf?* is that you don't need to be a hardcore gamer to enjoy the game," Drewsen adds. "They're fairly easy to pick up, and I think I could even get my mum to play it. A lot of the references in *What The Golf?* she won't get at all because she's not into videogames, but I don't think that's a problem because I see the whole project like a Pixar movie where it needs to work on two levels. It needs to be fun to play, and if you get the references and all that then you will enjoy it even more, but it's not necessary that you get the references."

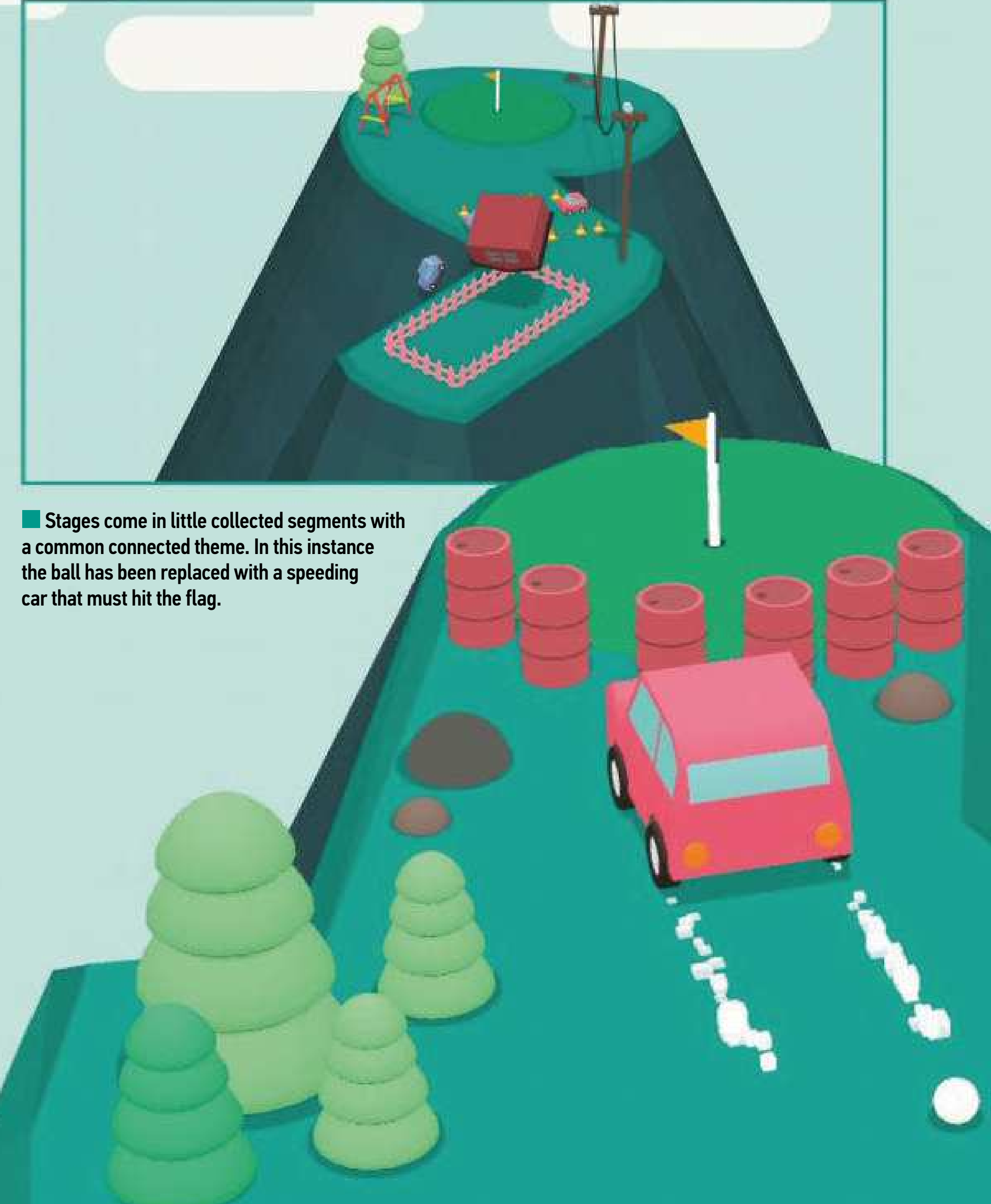
So what is *What The Golf?* Well, on the surface it's a golf game, not surprisingly, but when you actually play it and see it in action you'll come to understand that it's really only a golf game mechanically. While hitting a ball with a club towards a hole is where things begin, moving objects towards an end point by any means necessary becomes the real mission. It begs the question, how did all of this get started? "We were sitting around discussing games, and I can't remember which games we were discussing, but it turned out that nobody in the office liked golf or golf games," Drewsen tells us, but that just seemed to spur them on. "So we thought that it would be obvious to make a golf game. Can we make a golf game that *we* would find fun? Can we make something that's funny? How come it has to be this boring? Can we change that?"

There was, however, one small snag in that plan. "Unfortunately, nobody who works here knows anything about golf," Drewsen continues. "We're good at making games, but we're not good at golf, so we just started making what we thought was a golf game." What followed sounds like a free-wheeling journey through different concepts and creative directions that allowed the team to experiment and test out what kind of feel and challenge it wanted to take on with its interpretation of a golf game for people who hate golf.

"It was originally something completely different and was much darker and more complex, in a way. The working title at the time was *Golf Versus Evil* because we wanted to have a golf game with boss fights, so it kind of had this Dark Souls feel to it, in a way." But that direction didn't seem to chime with Triband's aesthetic and mission of fun, irreverent and accessible gaming, so it had to pivot. "We said, 'It's not working. It's not fun to make and it's too gloomy and too dark. We need to spice it up'. Then we rebooted the whole project three times, and in the end we came up with *What The Golf?* and at this time we had so many different golf mechanics that we thought, 'Can't we just put all of them in a game?'. Then we just started developing this crazy prototype that we put in the game."

That might sound like it would create a rather anarchic or disjointed gaming experience, but *What The Golf?* holds itself together with its singular commitment to abstract thinking and art style. The former makes a virtue of constantly changing, evolving and surprising. The later creates a welcoming atmosphere that plays well against the physics engine, helping to soften the edges that might otherwise emerge.





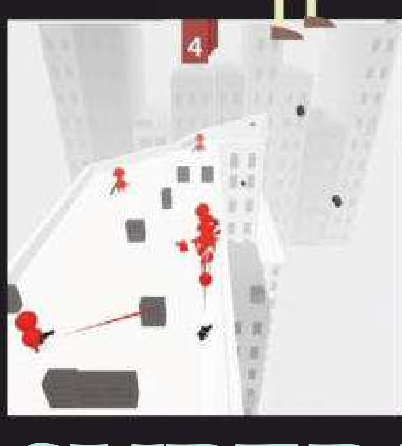
Stages come in little collected segments with a common connected theme. In this instance the ball has been replaced with a speeding car that must hit the flag.



As Triband points out, the advent of Unity has helped to bring about a new wave of particularly innovative games that call back to the kind of carefree game-making that epitomised the early Flash era.

"I THINK WHEN FLASH DIED I FEEL THAT A LOT OF CREATIVITY ALSO DIED. NOW, WITH UNITY, THAT CREATIVITY IS BLOSSOMING AGAIN"











SUPERPUTT

HOW WHAT THE GOLF? CREATED A TIME-BENDING SHOOTER GOLF HYBRID STAGE

One level we were very taken by with *What The Golf?* was a series of stages inspired by *Superhot*, the time-bending shooter with its minimalist red, white and black style and extended bullet-time feel. *What The Golf?* recreates that exact mechanic, bullets flying and everything, while also having you move a golfball around a stage. We wondered if this was born out of a close relationship between Triband and Superhot Team.

"They're not close friends, but we know them. We've had a few beers with them and they're really nice. Basically when we did it we showed it to them and said 'Hey, we've done this. Would you be okay with us putting it in the game?'. And they were just over the moon, super excited. They said, 'If we ever had to make a golf game, it would look like that'," explains Triband co-founder and COO Rune K Drewsen. But that was just the beginning of how *What The Golf?* would honour its indie peers.

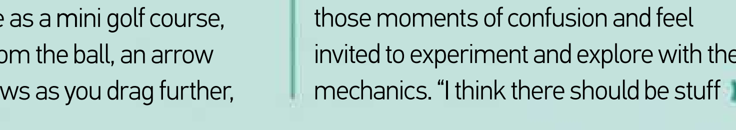
"Then we thought we were on to something, and wondered if there were other people and indie games that we really like that we should pay tribute to. We found some and we put them in the game too, but it's important that the stuff that you put in there doesn't feel forced. We have this saying here that everything is basically golf; like every game, ever made, is golf. Football is golf. Bowling is golf. Everything is basically golf, and I say that because it presents a great opportunity and tools because you step out of the door and you see the world in a completely different light, which is very important if you want a good creative process. Then, all of a sudden, you will see everything with these golf glasses on, and that just makes it super interesting because you could be sitting and eating your breakfast and suddenly think, 'Fried eggs; that's golf. Let's have a fried egg level'."

"Basically we used the same artist as we did with *Keyboard Sports*," says Drewsen. "He's a Swedish guy called Simon Post, and he lives in a cabin in the woods. He just has this creative energy and this awesome art style, and he's very quick, so when you tell him to do something he'll do it fast, which is important I think. So the art of the game is based upon his art style, and then it's super interesting when you do that kind of art style with a physics-based game, because you get something that's not 'out there' as much, but it plays with people's expectations, and if you have bright and solid colours they expect something that's not so serious, which *What The Golf?* definitely isn't, and they'll expect something silly and safe, and they might even explore more and do more crazy things that they wouldn't do in something more polished."

A great example of this is one of the earliest events that lets you know *What The Golf?* is not going to be like your typical golfing experience. Having been introduced to something that looks pretty easily identifiable as a mini golf course, you drag back from the ball, an arrow appears that grows as you drag further, you release, and the ball moves in the direction of the arrow, hopefully towards the hole. The ball goes in and you move on. So far, so golf. But then on another attempt a golfer is now on screen. He wasn't there before. You drag back from the ball once more and release… but it's the golfer that goes flying. Do the same again towards the hole, and the moment he hits the flag you've completed the course. Our description really doesn't do it justice, but that one hole has proven to be a real litmus test of players for Triband.

"It's interesting because with that level, when we showcase that, five per cent of people think they've done something wrong and broken the game, and the rest will just laugh and have fun and play around," Drewsen reveals. "I find that super interesting. How come they think they've broken it? I think it's a balance. We don't want to lose them and we don't want them to think they're bad. We want to encourage them that they're doing good."

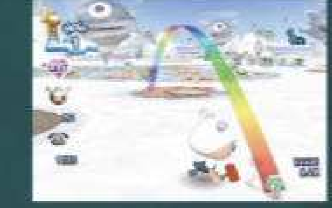
That's now the challenge for the team; making sure that people don't have those moments of confusion and feel invited to experiment and explore with the mechanics. "I think there should be stuff



WORLD CUP OF WEIRD

SOME OF OUR FAVOURITE ODD SPORTS GAMES

RIBBIT KING 2003



On the surface of things this is a golf game, except you're hitting a catapult with a mallet to fire a frog around a level to interact with as many objects as possible and put up the biggest score. But other than that, clearly golf.

GOOFBALL GOALS 2014



We like to think of this one as the QWOP of football games, as two sides of players who are animated a lot like they have their shoelaces tied together attempt to knock a ball into the opposition goal. Beyond that, the rules of the game do not apply.

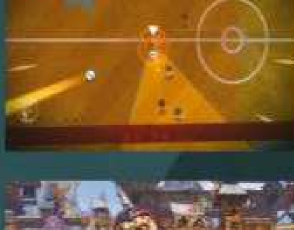
SPORTSFRIENDS 2013



A fantastic multiplayer experience, especially when you can get four players on the go at once and preferably locally, this PS4 and PC title has all of the trappings of great sporting competition, but nothing we could easily identify as a real-world sport.

BEHOLD THE KICKMEN 2017





Created by a team that admits it doesn't really know much about the rules of football, *Behold The Kickmen* never the less manages to harness some of the mechanics of *Sensible World Of Soccer* with a satire of the beautiful game rather well.

BLOOD BOWL 2 2015



A great example of real sport turned into something completely original, Blood Bowl has transitioned nicely from the world of tabletop gaming to videogames and the crazy tactical battle and violence, on offer here can be quite engrossing.



The drag back and release mechanic that is at the heart of classic golfing game interactivity has been applied in fun and sometimes challenging ways. Some stages require you to quickly drag and release to dodge in and out of moving obstacles or attackers, for instance.

> "WE'RE GOOD AT MAKING GAMES, BUT WE'RE NOT GOOD AT GOLF, SO WE JUST STARTED MAKING WHAT WE THOUGHT WAS A GOLF GAME"

in there for the casual gamer who just wants to play it on the toilet, and then there should be something for the speed runners or for the people who are really into games," Drewsen continues. "I think things that we've shown so far have been mostly for the casual gamer. I'm looking forward to when we can actually start to show the more complex stuff, because I think then we'll get even more people involved. At the moment it seems like the biggest concerns people have when they play the game is that, in a way, the demo is spoiling the fun for themselves. Not all of them believe we can carry on with the jokes for two hours, which we can. I don't think it's going to be a problem. A lot of people think, 'I've played this ten minutes and that's it. There can't be any more of this game. They can't even come up with more fun, can they?'."

That's interesting, because from the start *What The Golf?* reminded us, as a number of recent and similarly irreverent indie games have, of the golden age of Flash gaming. In those days we would play some of the most creative and unusual small releases you could think of and often muse how incredible it would be if someone would make a 'full game' out of the concept. So when players have seen *What The Golf?* at conventions and expos in recent months, perhaps that's part of where this misgiving arrives that there can't be more game than this. For Triband's part, attempting to tap into that vanguard spirit is exactly what it is aiming for.

"I feel that in the old Flash times people were more like renegades in a way," Drewsen tells us. "They were experimenting more and sitting down to come up with silly stuff. It didn't have to be all that polished, which meant that a lot of weird and wonderful games were designed. So I think when Flash died, I feel that a lot of creativity also died. Now, with Unity, that creativity is blossoming again, but I think people are still a bit scared to do the crazy stuff, because I feel that the indie scene has become more and more professional, more and more like the triple-A studios."

There are benefits and costs to that move, and certainly the line between what was once considered an indie game and what could hardly be distinguished from a triple-A release has become increasingly blurred. With *What The Golf?* we have a great example of a small team working on the fringes and trying to strike out with something new. "The videogame industry is still kind of this frontier place where you travel with your flag in hand over the savanna and you find a spot and claim it, and then you build a house and hopefully you find gold. Maybe somebody will come and join you and build a church and dig a well and if that happens, that's great. I feel it's a shame that everybody is kind of sticking to the known territory."

But for all that *What The Golf?* is packed full of innovative concepts and approaches to level design, it still plays within something that feels somewhat familiar, as discussed, and that's really at the heart of what is likely to make it a success. "If you make something that's too crazy people will consider it to be too 'arty-farty', and they will be a bit sceptical and they will put up their defences instead of jumping onto it and digging in and having fun with it," says Drewsen. "I think there's a delicate balance in a way that you need to make something that's crazy, but it's not crazy-crazy."

For our part, we can confirm that *What The Golf?* is every bit as crazy as it promises to be, but thanks to its grounding in classic golf-game mechanics and the way it references other, equally familiar genre styles, it feels incredibly approachable and inviting. What it offers is a bunch of fun little sandboxes to play with and gradually test yourself against. "If you actually start to look at golf games, they feel very similar, all of them," concludes Drewsen. "There are not really many golf games that really stick out. That's the beauty of it; taking something that everybody knows and turning it upside down. You get people in and they sit down and they feel safe, and that's where you can show them all of the silliness."



WHY I ♥...

DEVIL DAGGERS

JAKE STRASSER, HOUSE HOUSE

Let me sell you on Devil Daggers*. It's a game made by a tiny team in Melbourne. You're basically in first person and you're an entity with two hands on screen and you have right and left click and you're on a big disk, which just extends into blackness and you can fall off, because it's pretty small. A bunch of flying skulls appear and start chasing you and you use your magical hands to shoot daggers at them. With one hand you can do a stream of single daggers and with the other you have a big shotgun blast. You're just trying to survive as long as you can. I've played for a long time and I think my high score was something like maybe 300 seconds. It's just incredibly intense. It becomes like a dance. You know the sequence of events and where the skulls are going to spawn from and you begin to choreograph yourself in this quite refined space with these skulls flying at you. You learn as you go through each section and eventually it just becomes so intense and so full on that you just feel completely overwhelmed. It's a game that's taken this small space with very limited mechanics, but it's really plumbed the depths of what all of these things do. If you kill a certain kind of skull you get these gems, if you get enough gems you get better daggers, if you get really good you can kind of double jump by using the shotgun blast. You manage to survive that little bit longer and you get a better grip of how you survived the first wave and how to survive when the next wave happens and something else comes. It's a really nice game of discovery, albeit really intense and really short, which I appreciate a lot. You just jump in and it's done within a matter of seconds and you get to reflect and discover more as you go. And that's why I love* Devil Daggers.


"It's just incredibly intense. It becomes like a dance"
JAKE STRASSER, HOUSE HOUSE

Reviews

70

ASSASSIN'S CREED ODYSSEY

A fun jaunt in the Mediterranean or a sequel too soon from Ubisoft?



THE AVERAGE

Three of the numbers in a ten-point scale are of greater importance than the others: five, seven and, of course, ten. Some publications would fool you into believing that a 7/10 game is average, but that just doesn't make sense to us. **games™** reviews videogames on their entertainment value, and so any title that simply performs to an adequate standard will receive a 5/10. Simple. The elusive ten is reserved for games of incredible, irrefutable quality, but please be aware that a score of ten in no way professes to mean perfection. Perfection is an unattainable goal, and on a ten-point scale nothing should be unattainable. Again, simple. Our reviews are not a checklist of technical features with points knocked off for flaws, neither are they a PR-pressured fluff-fest. We'd never let that happen, and besides, you'd smell it a mile off. Finally, the reviews you find within these pages are most certainly not statements of fact. They are the opinions of schooled, knowledgeable videogame journalists designed to enlighten, inform and engage – the gospel according to **games™**.













AGREE/DISAGREE?

games™ is always right. But that doesn't stop some people disagreeing. Think we've got a review horribly wrong? Or did we nail it?

Let us know through the following channels:



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ODYSSEY'S MAIN STORY IS JUST ONE PILLAR IN A COLOSSEUM OF CONTENT; THERE'S SO MUCH TO DO OUTSIDE OF THAT MAIN CAMPAIGN

CULTS

During your adventure, you'll uncover a secret cult. Made up of 40-plus members, your job is to decipher who they are by locating the clues secreted around the country, and piece them together to reveal their identities. Once that's known, you can track them down and take them out. Be warned though, it's not easy. Increasing in rank the closer their position is to the inner sanctum, the tougher adversaries they'll be. But defeating them will offer some intriguing lore plus highly collectable, exotic gear. They'll also give you additional Artifact Fragments that are crucial to levelling up your beloved spear. Just don't expect it to be a quick and dirty job, though… you'll likely complete the game before you'll complete this task.





GREEK GOODNESS

Assassin's Creed Odyssey

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Switch, PC, Xbox One
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: Ubisoft
DEVELOPER: Ubisoft Quebec
PRICE: £54.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

Left: Yes, the *Black Flag*-esque ship sequences are back, and there's much more of them in *Odyssey* than *Origins*, plus a whole section of your inventory dedicated purely to upgrading your boat. Oh, and yes, the sea shanties are back as well…

BETTER THAN — SHADOW OF THE TOMB RAIDER



WORSE THAN — MASS EFFECT 2



Left: We're kind of in love with the Photo Mode. Yes, every triple-A game pretty much offers it now, but with evocative scenes such as these, it's so hard to resist taking a cheeky selfie or two as you explore Ancient Greece.

Let's get it out of the way: yes, *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* looks a lot like *Assassin's Creed Origins*.

Yes, it plays like it, too. Yes, the music stings, inventory scene, and maps are all pretty similar, too. But for every similarity, we can indignantly counter it with a difference, too. So yes, *Odyssey* looks like *Origins*, but the latest game has branching dialogue trees when *Origins* didn't. Yeah, mechanically they're pretty similar, but *Odyssey* lets you play – and *remain* – a female assassin (unlike giving us just a measly taster of it when we played briefly as Aya in *Origins*). And yes, the music, inventory and map will feel familiar, too, but there's romance options, conquest battles and Nation Power to tackle, too. So yeah, we get why some players might take one peek and think it's a half-baked facsimile, but take it from us; Ubisoft's kept all those elements that made *Origins* so achingly brilliant and built upon the others to craft *Odyssey*. Dismissing it as anything other than yet another stellar instalment in the Creed franchise is simply a disservice.

But good grief, it's overwhelming. The first time you pull back that map, and see how tiny and insignificant Kefalonia is in the sea (literally) of other places… And that's *before* you even clock the recommended ranks of some of the regions around you. "Am I even going to play it that much?!" you think, noting neighbouring island, Achaia, is ranked level 42-46. Like: what's even in Achaia, anyway? Who wants to go there? "I like it in Kefalonia," you think to yourself. "I might just spend the rest of the game here, where I won't get battered by a boar just for accidentally straying into its field of view." (Pro tip: AVOID ALL BOARS.)

The secret is to shrug that stuff off and just get stuck in. Like *Origins*, there are plenty of main and sub-quests to keep you going. And like *Origins*, they vary just enough to avoid falling into tedium. Yes, it all follows the same rigid template that all Ubisoft games do these days – vast open worlds rich for exploring, balanced with fair combat mechanics that let you stealthily take down the forts and camps you happen upon. And yes, while we've no doubt some people are getting bored of this tight mould, *we're* not, and that's the honest truth. There's just too much fun to be had, scrambling up those mountains and creeping through those tombs.

But while *Odyssey* has taken many cues from its predecessor, its story – which gently pulls in some of Assassin's Creed's wider lore – is all its own. You play as Alexios or Kassandra (hereby referred to collectively as "Kassios"). Yes, you actually get to pick from a male or female assassin this time around – but the contents of their pants doesn't affect the story, your gear, their perks and abilities, or… well, anything, really. And rightly so, right?



ENHANCED
IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

ASSASSIN: Yes, we know we shouldn't have favourites, but Kassandra is the better Assassin by far. It's about time we had the opportunity to kick ass as a female Assassin!

It's hard to touch on the story without being spoilery, so we won't do that, but where Bayek's story was a slick tale of familial revenge and he was very much The Wronged Man, Kassios' plight is… well, let's just say it's a little more complicated than that. A mercenary, Kassios' allegiances are less defined, which makes their battles – both private and public – more opaque and, if we're honest, just that little bit more exciting. Kassios isn't as bothered about Doing The Right Thing as they are Getting The Right Result For Themselves… and sometimes, that result is just getting paid for the work they did, goddammit.

There's now a modest selection of dialogue options in most of your conversations, but aside from a couple of instances, we're not convinced the choices you make have any meaningful bearing on the game's outcomes, and it's not like you can only make one choice; like Mass Effect, if you're so inclined, you can often hear *all* dialogue options. We'd recommend it, too, given you'll sometimes only get the full lowdown on your next objective by clicking to hear every option available.

And it's astonishing, this world. It's stuffed with colour and depth, flora and fauna, and life and death. It's every bit as breathtaking as

Bayek's Egypt was. It ticks on, regardless of what you do, or do not, choose to do. While *Odyssey* offers a suitably epic main story campaign, it's just one pillar in a colosseum of content; there's so much to do and explore outside of that main campaign, and it would be a (Greek) tragedy to ignore it.

We're delighted to report that combat's improved from *Origins*, too. It's not that Bayek was bad, exactly, but while there's a similar assortment of long-, mid- and short-ranged weapons to experiment with, the control scheme certainly feels more responsive this time around, and fighting less frustrating. Building up your skills and abilities is easier than ever, as well, so while they're still loosely grouped into three categories – Hunter, Warrior and Assassin – there's fewer now, and your choice is greater given you don't always need to have unlocked *all* of the skills below to get to the goodies at the top. That said, the ones you get early on – such as the meaty and magnificent Spartan Kick – are so fun to play with that it's hard to swap them out for anything else.

Talking of combat; *Odyssey* debuts Conquest Battles, which are exactly as they sound: huge, complex, alarming scuffles with dozens and dozens of soldiers, all battling it out for the same turf. While it's great to have something a little different, we're not a huge fan of them, and despite Kassios' refined CQC skills, it's easy to be overwhelmed by the sheer number of enemies, and accidentally strike a soldier on the same side as you.

Plus, the constant shift of alliances from the Spartans to the Athenians and back again means that when we stumble across a pair of soldiers duking it out at the side of the road, it's not always clear who we're supposed to jump in and save – or even *if* we should jump in and save at all. Unlike the Far Cry universe, which offers a similar digital playground of goodies and baddies to explore, your enemy is not so clear-cut here. Yes, it makes for a much more diverse story – both morally and literally (after all, if Kassios cares only about Kassios, that's all pretty much in keeping with what we consider a mercenary to be, right?) – but at the cost of clarity. It also meant that on more than one occasion, we ambled unhurriedly into what we thought was an allied camp… only to get battered in the doorway.

You'll have access to many of the same tools you had before, too. Where Bayek had Senu, Kassios has Ikaros, who offers all the same features as Bayek's bae bird, such as tagging enemies, spotting treasure, hunting for small prey and so on. Kassios has Revelation, or Athena's Sight, which – somewhat inexplicably – gives you a brief boosted glimpse of all the goodies in the immediate area, similar to a sixth sense skill Bayek had. And, of course, you'll also have your trusted steed Phobos. Yes, you're given some spiel at the beginning about the different skills that each of the three steeds have, but from our experience, it doesn't really seem to matter which one you plump for, and they'll all share the same skins, too. Oh, and you can still expedite your travels by instructing your pony to Follow Road – automatically trotting along a pre-set route and saving your trigger finger – as well as whistle each time you can't be bothered to double back and go looking for your horsie.

We're also not super fond of the naval aspects, either. Yeah, yeah we know - plenty of you lot *do* like it, and that's grand and all, but for us, it's just all a bit… well, unnecessary. Kassios is

FAQs

Q. LACKLUSTRE LOOTING?
Your Athena Sight – or Revelation – is critical here. Pop on some headphones and *listen* to where those gentle tingles come from…

Q. TIME TO COMPLETION?
Depends on you, and how many of those side missions you fancy. You're looking at a good 50-60 hours for a single playthrough.

Q. BAD ROMANCE?
Yeah, the "romance" is pretty cringey – Kassios' flirting goes from 0-60 in seconds – but they're worth it for the OMG factor alone.

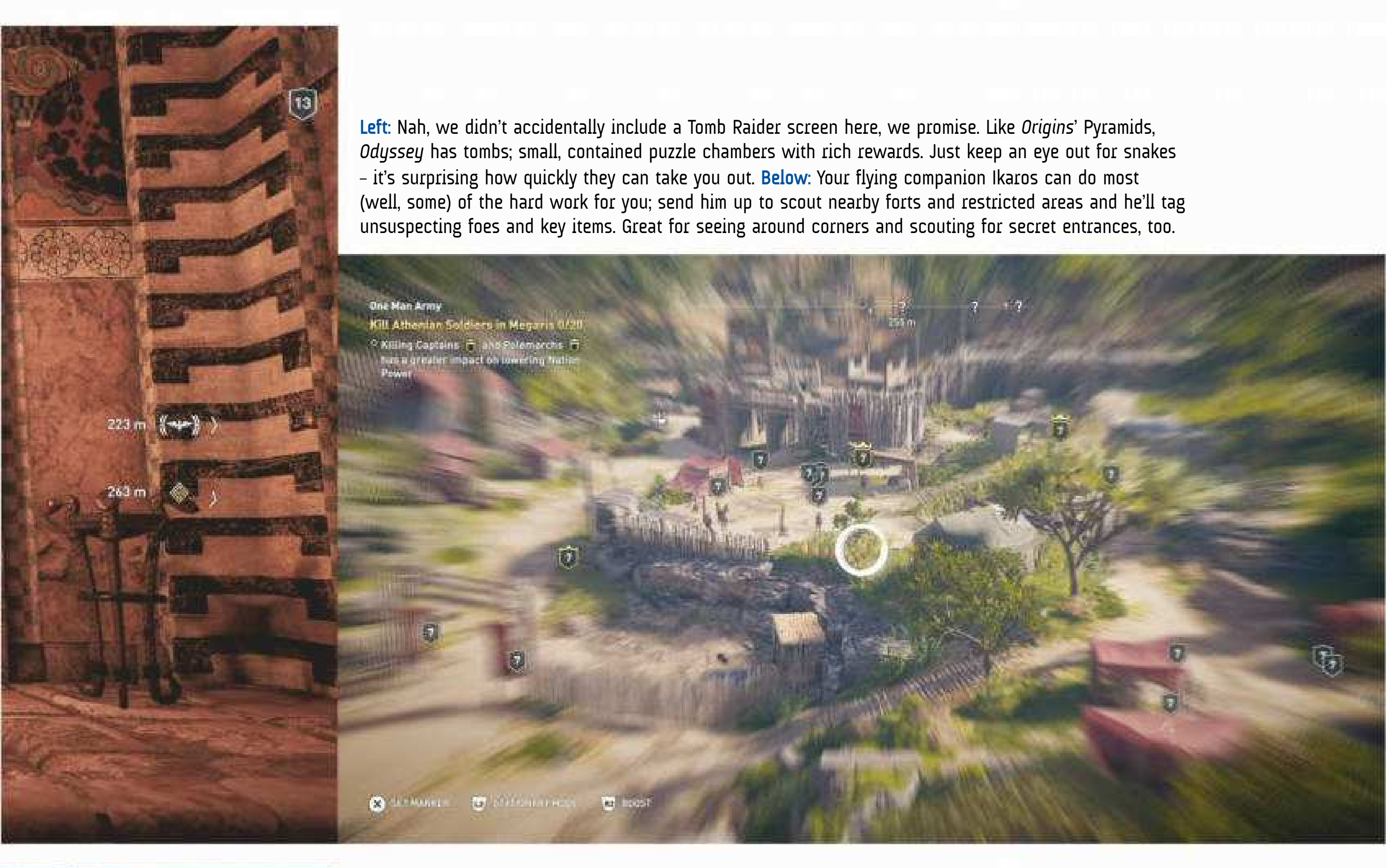


Below: See that dude with the yute? He's been outside that house for a while now. That's 'cos Kassandra's in the house becoming intimate with his wife. It's all part of a pretty fast and loose approach to romance in the game.



Right: See that? There's a non-lethal approach to every attack, which means those who prefer lovin' to fightin' can still safely explore.

WITH A TIMELINE SO CLOSE TO ORIGINS, IT'S DIFFICULT TO ADMIRE ODYSSEY ON ITS OWN MERIT

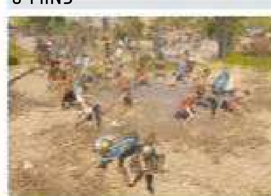


Left: Nah, we didn't accidentally include a Tomb Raider screen here, we promise. Like *Origins*' Pyramids, *Odyssey* has tombs; small, contained puzzle chambers with rich rewards. Just keep an eye out for snakes – it's surprising how quickly they can take you out. Below: Your flying companion Ikaros can do most (well, some) of the hard work for you; send him up to scout nearby forts and restricted areas and he'll tag unsuspecting foes and key items. Great for seeing around corners and scouting for secret entrances, too.

TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

6 MINS



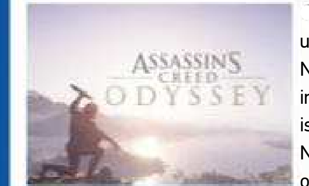
Talk about chucking you in at the deep end. *Odyssey* kicks off in a huge Conquest Battle that instantly has you squaring up against dozens of enemy troops. ARGH HELP!

60 MINUTES



We can't stop taking screenshots. Seriously. Every single frame of this game is insufferably gorgeous. We don't think we have enough storage on our console for all these caps…

6 HOURS



NOW you're showing us the credit title? NOW?! We're six hours in, *Odyssey*. Just how big is this thing if we're only NOW getting to see the opening cinematic?!

NATION POWER

In each territory, your map will indicate which of the warring factions has "control" of that particular zone. Both sides will chiefly leave you alone if they see you out and about (providing you don't flagrantly rob the poor townsfolk in front of their eyes, of course), but neither are super keen on you wandering into their restricted areas. To weaken a faction's hold, you must steal/burn their war supplies, dispatch of their troops, and help yourself to their treasures. Do this, and you'll find the Nation Power gauge will slowly decrease until the leader is deemed vulnerable. Find 'em, kill 'em, and the region will be liberated… right up until someone invades and you have to do it all over again. Sigh.



a mercenary. They kick-ass in all the right ways, so to suddenly plop them into a ship and have them shouting out orders to a crew they've never seen before? In fairness, the game isn't saturated with the ship bits, and for that we're grateful, but having to invest virtual monies and effort into upgrading the ship for tougher skirmishes when all we wanna do is get from one place to the other and start exploring… well, we have other places we'd prefer to spend that money, that's all. It's one of few elements in *Odyssey* that feel like it's busy work for busy work's sake.

Oh, there's Animus stuff too, of course. Unlike its predecessor, *Odyssey* chucks you right in there at the beginning – just so we know from the off that we're in a simulated environment. We know veteran fans love these bits, and so we don't begrudge them too much, but we can't help but admit that every time we're yanked out of Kassios' world, it feels little more than an unnecessary interruption, not least because Layla's lacklustre "Easter egg" nods to other Ubi IPs just feel clumsy and unimaginative.

The microtransactions? Yeah, Ubi's pushing these pretty hard this time around. There are the astonishingly brazen "Time Savers" add-ons which – for a significant investment of your real-life moolah – will let you apply a permanent boost to your experience points (XP) and Drachmae (in-game currency). Can you play without it? Certainly. Will your game be slower and less rewarding without it? Yup, pretty much.

And most irritatingly of all, calling it a "Time Saver" suggests that it's a shortcut, or perhaps something to help temper the grind, when really, Assassin's Creed's grind has never been the issue, at least not to us. We *like* exploring, seeking out new places, treasure, and collectables that all trickle deliciously into our little XP pot. We *like* working our way across a region to clear out the forts and camps. Calling it a "Time Saver" suggests the time we spend doing that stuff isn't worthy, when it really chuffin' is. Why on earth would Ubisoft make such a claim about its own game, when we – the people paying and playing it – don't?

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

ANOTHER WORLD: Did it *have* to be Ancient Greece? *Odyssey* shouldn't have to live in *Origins* shadow. We'd have loved a visit to a vastly different setting.

The upshot, though, is that however you play this – stealthy, swordy or something in-between – you'll find a rhythm and pace all of your own, in a way that melts away the paralysing fear of the sheer size and scope of the game.

It's just such a shame it's set in a world so similar to *Origins*, though. In many ways, *Odyssey* is a better game than *Origins* – both mechanically and narratively – but by locking it down in Ancient Greece, and a timeline so close to *Origins*, it's difficult to admire Kassios' story on its own merit, and in the isolated glory it deserves. Sadly, it's that, coupled with the aggressive microtransactions and the umpteen variations of "special editions" that make it difficult for fans to own them all, that takes the shine off what is oh-so-nearly a flawless experience.

VERDICT 8/10

NO, IT'S NOT JUST AN *ORIGINS* KNOCK-OFF



Above: Take a moment when you're climbing up a mountain only to leap off of it to the ground below and remember that this is a Forza game. You remember those stodgy, meticulous simulation racers you used to play a year ago? This is part of that series.

LAND OF HOPE AND GLORY

Forza Horizon 4

One of the great triumphs of the Forza Horizon series – and *FH4* is as great an example of it as any of the previous entries – is how it manages to make every type of car, every degree of horsepower, every variation in handling, feel thrilling. The slow trundle up the car class or short-lived novelty of an iconic but underpowered vehicle doesn't happen in *Forza Horizon 4*. In this game every car has something to offer. From the most ridiculous hyper car to the little P50 single-seater with three wheels, everything is a joy with which to explore the tarmac.

This really comes down to two key elements. The most obvious is the handling of each car, which can be very different. Some have exquisite control and precision that makes you feel invincible on the track; others seem to slide around erratically, but if you can just tame them they rocket off with stunning speed and yet others play on the edge between chaos and precision, drifting around corners and nipping in and out of traffic. The second element though is the course design, which is brilliant throughout. There are often recommended classes for each race that are optimised for that style of vehicle, but so many of them are impressively versatile.

There are so many challenges to pick from at any given moment, but each offers its own appeal. There are actually more events than there needed to be to continue up through the ranks and progress through the race-by-race ranking system that has been introduced into this game. But every one of them has its appeal and can be explored or avoided as you see fit. We're not always big fans of drifting, so we dipped in and out of that, but cross-country and dirt racing are an absolute blast, so we focused in on those a lot.

Between races, progression through the world and how you measure your progress has been changed significantly, with largely positive results. For a start, the multiple Festival locations and levelling up of each is gone. Instead you buy houses as your outposts around the map and your levelling up is concentrated on applying points to perk cards applied to specific cars. That personalises the experience in a way we really appreciate. Less successful to our minds is the avatar clothing and gesture unlocks that eat up space on the random wheelspins that occur after breaking certain levels. They're fine, but we would really rather concentrate on the cars and invest in them as we see fit rather than unlocking a new baseball cap.

We should take a moment to praise the general level of competition in this game

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PC
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Microsoft Studios
DEVELOPER: Playground Games
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-12
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

THE DRIVATAR SYSTEM STILL DELIVERS SOME OF THE MOST COMPETITIVE, AGGRESSIVE AND ENGAGING AI COMPETITION IN A RACING GAME

FAQs

Q. ANY CLASSIC UK LANDMARKS?

Nothing that jumped out at us as completely obvious. That was actually rather refreshing as it manages to dodge cliché British locales.

Q. FRUSTRATING IN-APP STUFF?

None at all. *Forza Horizon 4* is always pushing content, but it's content you have. It just wants you to see it all.

Q. SO, WHY NO PERFECT SCORE?

As fantastic as this game is at its best, there are some technical glitches and hiccups that surprised and bothered us.

Below: Photo mode is going to ruin our lives. We're taking three-times as long to finish games because of it, but we love it so much and it's great in *FH4*.





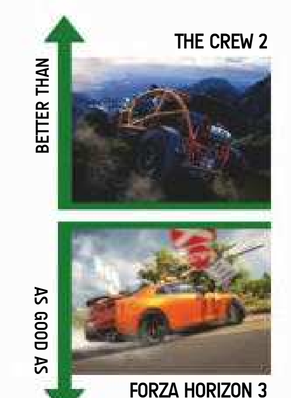
Below: Forza broadly has become such a multi-faceted experience that caters to so many interests. Racing, car designing, tuning, collecting, exploring. You can really customise your way of enjoying this game.

TIPPING THE HAT

Replacing the Bucket List challenges from the previous game are a collection of story missions that involve doing stunts for a second unit director, entering drift competitions and teaming up with a livestreamer who wants to recreate classic racing game moments for the Horizon Festival. The latter is a series of challenges that honour the history of arcade racers, and it is really rather surprising. Videogames tend to exist in their own bubble realities, never acknowledging anything that sits outside of their respective stable. If *Forza Horizon 4* had included some nods to older Forza games, Gears Of War or Halo (which it actually does with one challenge), that would be been easy to comprehend. However, Playground calls out and honours *Outrun*, *Test Drive*, *Crazy Taxi* and more. There's even a nice *Project Gotham Racing* nod, the series that in some respects Playground's has replaced.

BETTER THAN

THE CREW 2



AS GOOD AS

FORZA HORIZON 3

before moving on. The Drivatar system, as silly as the name remains, still delivers some of the most competitive, aggressive and engaging AI competition in a racing game we can think of. The game is always pushing you to increase the difficulty for a return of greater rewards if you win, and push yourself, and that's welcome too. There's a constant relationship between you and *FH4* as it keeps feeding you new races, new showcase events, new hidden cars to go hunting for, new cars to buy, houses to move into and on and on and on. It might be built to keep your attention and stop you from walking away, but it feels a lot like Playground is just very excited about sharing everything it's made with you. There's a lot of personal investment pouring out from these notifications and new icons popping up on the map.

The live nature of *Forza Horizon 4* through Forzathon, returning from the previous game, remains a great mixture of celebration and challenge as you meet up with other players and take on collective objectives under a time limit. It's a loose cooperative experience that is unlike anything else out there. The addition of seasons, each lasting a week and having a worldwide impact on the map for every player, helps to maintain that sense of connectedness even if you prefer to race alone. *Forza Horizon 4* strikes a great balance of at once being more online connected and global than ever, but still being totally viable as a single-player experience.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

TIS THE SEASON: The rotating season system that affects everyone playing the game for a week at a time works really well. It rotates content as well as conditions, has substantial gameplay impact and looks gorgeous.

Beyond the filler of the levelling system that exists in the avatar customisation, it's really just a few technical issues that hold this game back from perfection. Game stuttering was a big one, suddenly having the game freeze and unfreeze for a brief moment, often after leaving an event and re-entering the freeform world. There's also some frustrating geometry out there that if you don't rewind yourself to safety fast enough will leave you trapped and having to reload the game. We don't know how we kept doing it to ourselves (we sort of do… our off-roading was sometimes a little over-ambitious), but it happened a few times. These are things that are perhaps not so uncommon in an open-world game, but were particularly troublesome in this format.

These were ultimately small frustrations though. Hiccups in an otherwise utterly joyous racing experience. This is about as essential as any Xbox One exclusive has been so far, which we would consider high praise for Playground's latest racer, but perhaps damning for the state of the Xbox One's line-up. If, however, this sets a marker down for the next few years of games from Microsoft Studios then the future is very bright indeed. *Forza Horizon 4* is quite brilliant in virtually everything it does.



VERDICT 9/10

BOTH A GREAT RACER AND GREAT SANDBOX

JUMPERS FOR GOALPOSTS

FIFA 19





Above: Gameplay improvements are subtle this season, with the emphasis on evolution over revolution. Through balls are more powerful and strikers' running routes more intelligent, and a host of new ball control techniques mean you have more options when it comes to avoiding tackles and interceptions.

A football game's exhibition mode is usually its most basic and unassuming, reserved for those late nights while mildly intoxicated with friends or, if you're dedicated, as a place to practise new tactical approaches without fear of ruining your online win percentage. Thanks to a complete rethink as to what an exhibition match might look like, however, *FIFA 19* has managed to turn tradition on its head and make its generic Kick Off mode its most interesting on offer.

Alongside games featuring normal rules, you can play a number of variations of the sort that certainly wouldn't make it past FIFA's professional regulations. Survival, for example, sees you lose a randomly selected player each time you score, adding a risk-reward element to every attempt at goal. No Rules removes all fouls and offsides, while Heads and Volleys limits you to scoring only from strikes made when the ball is in the air.

The result of these quite basic additions is a game that is more appealing on an immediate level and one that seems less interested in taking itself so seriously at every juncture, allowing you a space in which to play the kind of football you would invent yourself as a 12-year-old playing in the park. It's a shame there's no jumpers for goalposts options.

Furthermore, engaging in these modes forces you to think twice about how you set about winning and, in turn, that sharpens your overall skill set and helps you conquer *FIFA 19*'s other arenas. What better place to practise your headers than the Heads and Volleys option? How are you going to learn to avoid the attentions of opposition defenders more readily than in the No Rules mode?

Acting as runner-up in the 'best features' category is The Journey, with this season being the finale of the story of Alex Hunter. He's joined by childhood friend Danny Williams and his sister Kim Hunter, giving you the option of three playable characters and the ability to switch between them as frequently (or not) as you like. Despite the added diversity, however, the same positives and problems as past attempts at a convincing narrative remain.

The dialogue writing feels extremely strained, written with a certain kind of audience in mind as opposed to thinking about the character first. Alex doesn't so much come across as a believable footballer as much as he does as invention based on how footballers communicate themselves through social media, meaning you'll likely warm to him if you indulge and enjoy such things. If you don't, then don't expect to feel any empathy for him here.

Still, The Journey remains an interesting way to consume a football game and it's certainly a solid enough concept to make us hope that EA continues to invest in it and improve it over the course of future games. This season, though, the best stories to be found are in Kick Off mode.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

SHOULDER BARGES: The physical interplay between players is much improved over previous editions, with tussles and tackles resulting in realistic falls and bumps as opposed to circus-like flips to the ground.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PC
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: EA Sports
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4 (1-22)
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN

FIFA 18



WORSE THAN



PES 2017

VERDICT 8/10

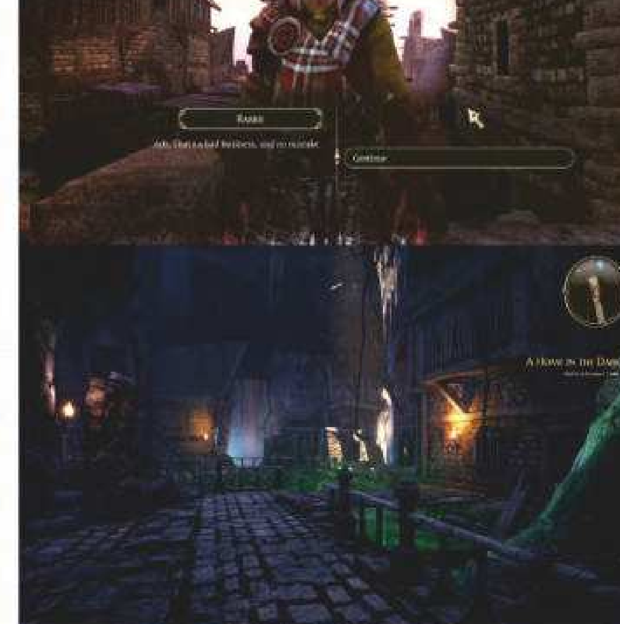
A SEASON OF FUN IDEAS AND GREAT PRESENTATION

Below: The newly acquired UEFA Champions League license is put to good use, with all of the expected visual paraphernalia accompanied by a dedicated commentary team who sprout an impressive volume of team-specific lines of dialogue – adding to the sense of grandeur and uniqueness.









Above: The interface for combat is a little odd but works surprisingly well.
Right: Sometimes, when the lighting is just right, *The Bard's Tale IV* looks excellent.

DOESN'T QUITE HIT ALL THE RIGHT NOTES

The Bard's Tale IV: Barrows Deep

Sometimes RPGs, even ones with modest budgets, emerge fully formed, perfectly crafted and able to satisfy the interests of several different kinds of players. Then there's *The Bard's Tale IV*. It's rougher than a badger's arse, as we're sure the game itself would agree.

The Bard's Tale series hasn't had a proper entry since 1988's *Thief Of Fate* and we think that's key to explaining why this is a dungeon crawler in the most classic sense. Deceptively linear and in first person, this has you inching your way through elaborate mazes full of turn-based combat and puzzles. For modern players, this will evoke the likes of Grimrock, but despite being part of an old series, *Barrows Deep* feels a little less burdened by the past than some. The grid-based movement system isn't there, letting players move around freely. It comes across a bit Elder Scrolls-esque, a comparison that really is unfair, not least because *The Bard's Tale IV* clearly does not have the massive budget that Bethesda's titles have.

It's certainly capable of lush scenery, but for every wonderfully lit underground lair there's a drab flat square of mud and rubble that looks like it needed more time in the development oven. It's a fun world to explore at least, with new abilities unlocking new shortcuts and secrets at a nice steady rate, though it does mean retreading a lot of the same ground for a while.

Where it shines is in its combat. Though its presentation here – 2D sprites laid out in first person against 3D enemies – will be off-putting for some, there's little denying that it works in execution. You start with your titular bard (a lass named Melody is the default but you can make your own), who can drink to bolster their musically themed powers. Then you have a motley party of fighters, rogues and wizards all laid out on a grid.

Who goes in front and the distance from enemies are all tactical decisions that shape the course of each skirmish, determining which abilities can be used and who gets struck by attacks. As in the best of things, it's simple to understand but gradually blossoms into lots of complex encounters, with you managing a larger group of characters over time while getting in longer and more involved battles. It's a shame that it takes so many hours to get there, though, because the combat is the game's main strength and the initial hours hint at none of it.

So, it's a mixed bag, though true to it's name, very deep. It'll last a long while too, well over 50 hours if you want to have a go at everything. You'll just have to look past a lot of rough edges.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

NO PARODY: *Barrows Deep* doesn't take itself seriously but isn't a constant bad joke like 2004's reboot of the series, which we have to say is something of a relief.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: PS4, Xbox One
ORIGIN: United States
PUBLISHER: inXile Entertainment
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £27.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
PLAYERS: 64-bit processor, Windows 7/8/8.1/10 (64-bit), 8GB RAM, NVIDIA GeForce GTX 760 (2,048MB) or Radeon HD 7970 (3,072MB), 55GB available space
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



BETTER THAN
THE BARD'S TALE (2004)



WORSE THAN
LEGEND OF GRIMROCK

VERDICT 7/10
CHARM SHINES THROUGH IN A ROUGH AND MODEST RPG

SUPERLATIVE TURN-BASED STRATEGY THAT'LL MELT YOUR BRAIN

Frozen Synapse 2



Above: The neon red and green of the opposing forces against the dark backdrop sees shootouts imbued with an unembellished, yet undeniably slick and distinctive, visual style, backed up by a euphoric soundtrack that perfectly fits the game's futuristic design.



DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Mode 7
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £23.79
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1 (1-2 Online)
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows Vista 64-bit, 2GHz Dual Core, 4GB RAM, Shader Model 3.0 & at least 1GB VRAM
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

Taking control of a security force tasked with eliminating a sentient AI, *Frozen Synapse 2* sees you battle your way through isometric maps, while planning, testing and routinely reworking your combat strategy. After deploying your troops, you issue a series of intricate commands to each individual soldier, giving them orders to move into position, shoot at or ignore enemies, or duck for cover. These delightfully tactical turn-based encounters take place in increments of five seconds, meaning that acute attention to detail and meticulous execution is the order of the day.

Fortunately, you're granted the gift of foresight for concocting your segmented plan of attack: you can issue endless orders to your units and watch the resulting scenarios without having to commit until you're satisfied with the outcome. When you're done daydreaming about how useful that function would be in real life, you can use it to save hapless soldiers who've unwittingly fallen foul to a hail of enemy gunfire, or get your soldiers into position to pull off the perfect shot. As long as you remain undetected, you can even see enemy movements; open fire or get spotted, however, and the opposition's manoeuvres are reduced to educated guesswork involving trial and error tactics.

Each soldier specialises in a particular weapon, the type of artillery on hand having a vast impact on how you approach the situation at hand. Shotguns have the benefit of added accuracy, but lack the range of SMGs, while knives offer a stealthier approach and grenade launchers can be used to take down walls and create new paths to the opposition.

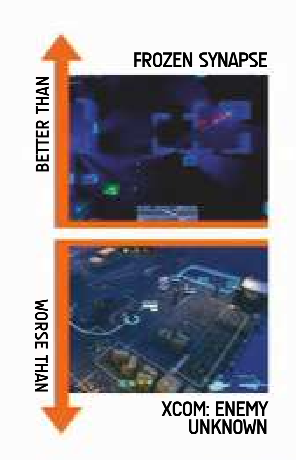
While this second instalment does little to evolve the gameplay ideas established in the 2011 original, the excellent combat and tactical depth, backed up by a crisp interface and some seriously stylised graphics, keep the formula feeling fresh throughout the newly added single-player campaign. Set in Markov Geist, a cyberpunk city run by an intriguing bunch of rival organisations and plagued by terrorist group Sonata, the narrative, while not overly investing, does offer a sense of purpose and added depth to the world.

When you tire of battling armies of AI opponents, there's also a robust multiplayer on offer to test your tactics against other payers. The unpredictability of human opponents makes for vastly more thrilling and memorable encounters compared to playing alone. A variety of different modes greatly extends the game's lifespan, including 'One Turn', a mode in which you must complete the objective in a single round to achieve victory.

More casual strategy enthusiasts may be put off by *Frozen Synapse 2*'s overwhelmingly considered approach to conflict, but the game's slow pace and second-by-second execution of the perfect strategy can make for a thrillingly tense experience that's far more satisfying than simply mindlessly mowing down wave after wave of enemies.

WORLDWIDE
TAKING GAMING ONLINE

YOUR MOVE: Asynchronous multiplayer lets you queue up and switch between different multiplayer games, so you're never stuck for an opponent, and can execute your plan of attack at your own pace.





Above: When not dealing with a Sonata incursion, you can take on various contracts. These include tasks such as setting up checkpoints, delivering items and infiltrating buildings. The funds from these allow you to purchase new units to expand the might of your military force.



TACTICAL AND CONSIDERED LIKE CHESS, WITH VIOLENCE

PARTY OVER HERE, OR ANYWHERE

Super Mario Party



We couldn't find a hip rooftop party in time for this review but were nonetheless determined to follow the spirit of those early Switch commercials, so set ours up in tabletop mode at the pub while passing around four single Joy-Cons. *Super Mario Party* finally gives the Switch its first delightful game for social gatherings since the short-lived *1-2 Switch*.

A '*Super*' prefix instead of another number doesn't mean a series overhaul. You're still playing an interactive board game sprinkled with mini-games, as well as a few other experimental asides. With the Joy-Con you can 'hit' your dice block, which you can use either a normal die or one specific to each of the 20 playable characters, while you're frequently encouraged to high-five each other for bonus coins, but otherwise motion control gimmicks are fairly self-restrained.

Indeed, the majority of mini-games use traditional controls, so when you do get to waggling they're pretty creative, such as carefully flipping a frying pan to cook all six sides of a cube-shaped steak or all the ones from the Sound Stage that capture the brilliance of Rhythm Paradise, as you keep to the beat skewering falling pieces of fruit or wiping windows on a skyscraper. HD rumble is also cleverly taken advantage of, such as guessing what's behind the curtain based purely on the vibration pattern and intensity, while another has you shaking crates of acorns to try and figure out which have more in them so that you get the greater haul at the end. Naturally, some are more memorable than others, but there's a decent variety that frequently has you re-orientating your Joy-Con, which you have plenty of time to figure out as each mini-game is preceded by a very welcome playable tutorial.

Having each player take a turn, with events cropping up in between, means that playing with even 10 turns can take as long as an hour, which can make the board's late-stage shenanigans all the more of an upset than any blue shell, especially when bonus stars are doled out based on completely random achievements. If you have less patience for that, you can just focus on the mini-games themselves in a variety of modes, including a sort-of single-player campaign incorporating all 80 mini-games.

Avoiding salty competition altogether is River Survival, which is essentially a co-op river-rafting version of *Out Run*.

It's just disappointing that there's not enough co-op mini-games available, meaning you'll definitely find yourself repeating some of them even on the first run.

The full price can be off-putting, especially if you need to fork out for another pair of Joy-Cons since it's not possible to play with a Pro controller. Otherwise, this is the best *Mario Party* in a long time on the perfect console for it.

CONNECTED

EXPANDING THE GAMEPLAY

BANANA SPLIT: Using two Switch tablets (albeit with two copies of the game), you can play a mini-game where you match up two halves of a banana. The screen-sharing tech is truly impressive.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Switch
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Nintendo, NDcube
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

BETTER THAN

1-2 SWITCH



WORSE THAN



MARIO KART 8 DELUXE

VERDICT 7/10

TERRIFIC FOR GETTING A SUPER PARTY STARTED



Above: Collecting stars remains the key to winning a board, though there's also other underhanded ways of obtaining them. Either way, when you do snag one, the look on your rivals' faces never fails to make us laugh.





Your main task revolves around finding these crystals, which are hidden about the house. Disappointingly they're a little easy to solve, which means the ending appears all too quickly.

IS SPECTREVISION'S GAME WORTH CROSSING OVER FOR?

Transference

Whilst Elijah Wood is no stranger to voicing various characters in videogames, *Transference* marks the first time he's actually produced one. It's an interesting change of direction for the popular actor and what he sees as the next logical step for his company, SpectreVision (previously known as The Woodshed).

While *Transference* is perfectly playable without the use of VR, we implore you to ignore this option and fully embrace playing the game in virtual reality as the team originally intended. It offers a rich level of immersion, which is only accentuated by the game's incredibly unsettling atmosphere and some very effective jump scares. For the most part you're simply exploring a deserted flat, but clever lighting and masterful use of sound transform your relatively brief journey into *Transference*'s bizarre worlds.

Like *Gone Home, What Remains Of Edith Finch* and other similar games, the less you know about *Transference* the better the ride will be for you. The game is effectively set within a simulation constructed by scientist, Raymond Hayes, who has managed to upload a person's consciousness to a purer form, those people being himself and his nearest and dearest. Raymond, along with his wife and son, must navigate two versions of their home, using handy light switches to flick between the two realities (one of which is constantly in flux and filled with glitching items and references to various missing computer files that halt your progress).

Numerous items can be opened, picked up and investigated in *Transference*, and as you gingerly explore the two areas you'll discover subtle clues to what happened and why Raymond went to the extreme lengths he did. Many of these revelations come in decently acted videologs and cover numerous themes that range from abuse to obsession and similar adult themes.

It's certainly a well-crafted story for the most part, but it lacks the sharp writing of titles like *Gone Home* and the sense of dread and unease that SpectreVision has created from an aesthetic point of view isn't matched by *Transference*'s script. It's still miles ahead of most triple-A affairs, but considering the company's background, we were hoping for something a little deeper.

If *Transference* has a solid story and exceptional atmosphere, it falls down somewhat in the mechanics department. While numerous puzzles have been included, many of them are quite simple to solve, meaning your grey matter is rarely tested. Then there's the matter of length, with the average playthrough taking less than an hour and a half. Granted you'll have most likely missed the odd videolog, but with no alternate endings, there's very little reason to return to *Transference* unless you're a sucker for Platinum trophies. Ultimately *Transference* is about as deep as a puddle, but it remains an interesting experience that becomes significantly better when played in VR.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

REPLAY VALUE: It doesn't take long to complete, but some alternate endings or new locations would certainly help *Transference* feel a little more substantial than it currently does.



DETAILS

FORMAT: PSVR
OTHER FORMATS: PS4, Xbox One, PC
ORIGIN: United States
PUBLISHER: Ubisoft
DEVELOPER: SpectreVision, Ubisoft Montreal
PRICE: £19.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

AS GOOD AS

FIREWATCH





WORSE THAN

GONE HOME



VERDICT 6/10

A STRONG, IF SOMETIMES FRUSTRATING DEBUT

LOST IN SLIME

Dragon Quest XI: Echoes Of An Illusive Age

Where droves of contemporary RPGs have adopted real-time battles and systemic worlds, *Dragon Quest XI* digs its heels in and doubles down on the old-school, turn-based action. It feels like a game that has overshot its release date by a decade – and the developers including the *DQVIII*'s protagonist's outfit in your inventory from the outset feels like a mission statement.

Here's an game for those who loved PS2-era JRPGs, and to some that might sound like a glowing recommendation, and it is… of sorts, however its stubborn nature to stick with what's worked in the past betrays game design that's out of date.

Take battles: they play out in a familiar turn-based fashion – choose actions from a list for your party of four, and the order plays out according to each participant's agility stat. The system is completely fine, but it gets old. The world's populated with legions of monsters and battles soon become rote – especially in sections where you find yourself having to grind for items or experience. Again, some people may salivate at this, but these skirmishes are supposed to be the game's bread and butter. You can automate things, though, enabling the AI take over each of your character's actions and letting you check your phone or something in the meantime. This does make navigating through the monster-strewn overworld a lot more bearable, but this option shouldn't have to exist in the first place.

Boss battles are a little more interesting, and actually require brainpower. For example, a monster with tentacles comes up in the first third of the game, and you have to alternate between dealing damage to the beast itself while keeping its appendages down and out for the count. It's situations like these where you'll have to carefully consider about buffing and healing your party while maintaining a good amount of damage on potentially multiple fronts, and makes for good encounters, but they're the exception rather than the norm.

The spine underneath these battles is seemingly threadbare skill tree system, but

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PC, 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Square Enix
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £44.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: One
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

IF THE GAME'S INFECTIOUS UPBEAT TONE DOESN'T GET THROUGH TO YOU, THEN ITS MONSTER DESIGNS AND THEIR PUN-PACKED NAMES WILL



Your band of merry adventurers are the best part of *Dragon Quest XI*, they're a good bunch of characters to spend upwards of 60 hours with.

FAQs

Q. CAN I CHANGE THE PROTAGONIST'S APPEARANCE?
Some gear sets change how you look, but the hero is stuck with that haircut for the entire game.

Q. WHICH CAMERA STYLE SHOULD I USE FOR BATTLES?
The default camera where you can freely move characters sucks and doesn't affect how battles play out, change it to 'Classic' for much more cinematic fights.

Q. DO I NEED TO PLAY DQ I-X?
No, this has a few connections here and there to older Dragon Quest titles, but like Final Fantasy each entry is pretty much its own thing.

Below: Pep Powers – essentially limit breaks – are powerful, but require one or more character to be 'Pepped Up', which is out of the player's control, making them hard to plan for. **Left:** Some of the names of monsters and locations are fantastic examples of wordplay and add to the game's charm.

Right: Whilst exploring, you can encounter monsters that sparkle. Defeat these and you can ride them as mounts, granting you access to areas you wouldn't be able to reach on-foot or on horseback.

one that's actually got a bit of depth to it. You spend skill points to unlock abilities for each character, each tied to a different 'branch' depending on who you're speccing – mage Rab has branches for staffs and magic, but also for claws should you want him to deal more physical damage, for instance. And characters can be respecced at save points for a relatively meagre cost if you want to tweak your designs and change stuff up.

Speaking of the game's characters, the core cast is great. Some of your party members walk a tightrope, frequently teetering between charming and annoying, but for the most part they're a jovial cast of heroes that are well written and brought to life vibrantly by their voice actors. The rest of the game's characters are disappointingly middle-of-the-road, save for the villains who chew the scenery like it's a gourmet sandwich, which fits well with *Dragon Quest*'s overall tone.

It's a shame, then, that the main cast is inserted into a fairly RPG-by-the-numbers story. It could've been written on a napkin: male hero of destiny learns of his lineage and sets out to pick up magical MacGuffins to save the world from evil. The first half of the story plays out like a story-of-the-week anime – think the original Pokémon series – where you'll stroll into a settlement, encounter someone of importance with a problem, which you solve and are rewarded with one of said items of plot significance, before continuing on to do the same thing again. Things do pick up about 20 hours in where a significant event turns everything on its head, but the price to get there is 20 hours of a pretty dull plot where you're mostly reliant on the game's characters to pull you through.

We say 'mostly reliant' because it's undeniable that *Dragon Quest XI* has a significant amount of charm. If the game's infectious upbeat tone doesn't get through to you, then its monster designs and their pun-packed names will. They're drawn and animated with a deft hand, and complement Akira Toriyama's character designs well. And the world itself is bursting with things to do, from exploring every nook and pathway to uncover equipment and items for crafting, to distractions such as side-quests, a casino and a host of minigames.

It's easy to get lost in, especially if you have a completionist's compulsion. This quality isn't extended to the game's spartan soundtrack, however.

There are a couple of themes for towns, the overworld and battles, and they're only memorable for how much they get drilled into you. Over and over again. And at times the score causes a few cases of tonal mishmash: the same jovial battle theme is used for a lighthearted scuffle and a moment where characters are making a grave last stand. It's jarring. And where big-budget RPG rivals such as Ni No Kuni and Final Fantasy, as well as smaller projects like *I Am Setsuna*, can pull off full, diverse scores, *Dragon Quest XI* has no excuse.

If you haven't noticed already, it feels like for every good point to say about *Dragon Quest XI*, there's something around the corner ready to knock it down a notch or two. It's a hard game to fully recommend as a result. On the one hand, fans of the series and retro JRPGs will love it, because it fits that bill excellently. Series newcomers or those who are looking for some innovation from the series, however, might want to approach it with a shade of caution.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

DIVERSIFY: The series has successfully experimented with different genres with *Builders* and *Heroes*, so it's a shame to not see any innovation with its mainline entries.

GO 8-BIT

The Japan-only 3DS version of *Dragon Quest XI* stands out in that it has a scaled-down 3D graphical style to fit the game on the limited hardware, but also that you can play it out like an old-school sprite-based entry to the series. It's a novelty more than anything, but a neat flourish from the developers that pays tribute to the Nintendo consoles where the series cut its teeth and began the momentum that would eventually lead it to this most recent instalment. Initially, the game plays out with each of graphical styles occupying one of the dual screens, but after a while you can choose how the game plays out from save points.



VERDICT 6/10
DISAPPOINTINGLY BY THE BOOKS, BUT HAS CHARM

A MATTER OF TIME

The Gardens Between

A beautiful but all-too-brief brain-teaser from an Australian studio previously best known for games about (ideally not) crashing trains into each other, *The Gardens Between* features vivid visuals and a delicious ambient soundtrack, but it's easily finished inside three hours. Which is to say: this is gorgeous, gently testing the grey matter with measured care, but it'd have benefitted from having a little more to it.

Playing *The Gardens Between* requires just three controls – a pleasantly low barrier for entry. You move time forwards and backwards within each meticulously detailed stage with the left stick, while the Switch's A button sees either of the game's protagonists, neighbouring kids Frendt and Arina, interact with a small array of in-game elements in front of them.

These vary wildly, despite being in limited supply per level. Whatever the dreamlike stage, Arina must deliver an illuminated lantern to an exit point to complete it. It's never already shining, so a light source must be found somewhere between A and B. Unfortunately, there are black hole-like entities in the environment that will steal this light away – leading to some creative methods of moving the game's MacGuffin of choice to where it needs to be.

Sometimes the light escapes Arina and Frendt's own (already surreal) plane of existence, travelling through two-dimensional graffiti. Elsewhere, lightning is used to power electrical items to open new paths, while an old-school printer becomes a more modern 3D version, producing essential equipment. Frequently, curiously bouncy cubes must be used to carry the lantern to higher ground.

By playing around with time – the characters flow with it, following pre-determined routes, rather than independently by your hand – you quickly see how each level is built from moving pieces that must be in very specific locations, at very precise moments, to line up and unlock the next pathway. Sometimes, the very steps of Arina and Frendt must be coordinated with the world around them, such as to input numerical codes or cross a drain using gigantic, discarded drinks cans.

The lantern can be read as a symbol of the protagonists' friendship, flickering on and off, as they silently (and amusingly) get in little huffs with each other. But it distracts from the game's core narrative, slight though it is, which concerns itself with shared experiences and memories. All of the levels link back to a point in the pair's history, a snapshot of which appears once each is completed – and everything ties together in an unexpectedly bittersweet denouement.

Excellent for its duration, *The Gardens Between* isn't one to rush back to once completed, revealing its entire hand at the first time of asking. But while it undoubtedly ends too quickly, as a calling card of terrific imagination, this game is quite the statement of intent from its makers. More soon, please.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

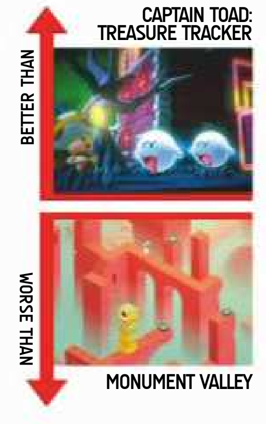
SOLO WOES: While it'd require an overhaul of how the game controls, what with there being two characters on screen, we'd have loved to see a cooperative two-player option.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Switch
OTHER FORMATS: PlayStation 4, PC, Mac
ORIGIN: Australia
PUBLISHER: The Voxel Agents
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £17.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

CAPTAIN TOAD: TREASURE TRACKER





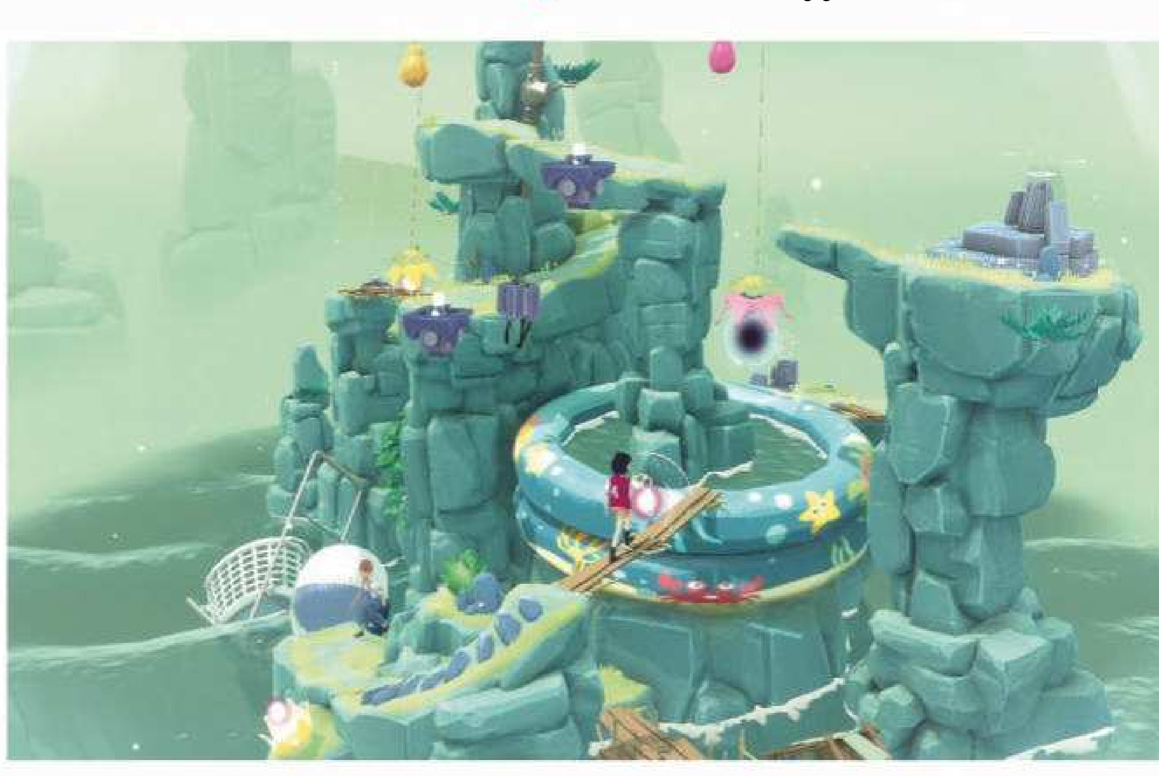
WORSE THAN

MONUMENT VALLEY



VERDICT 8/10

AN ELEGANT AND EXPRESSIVE NEW PUZZLE EXPERIENCE





Above: The game's simple controls make it as quick to pick up as the still-peerless *Monument Valley* (not that this is too far behind it), but without the same sense of tactile satisfaction.

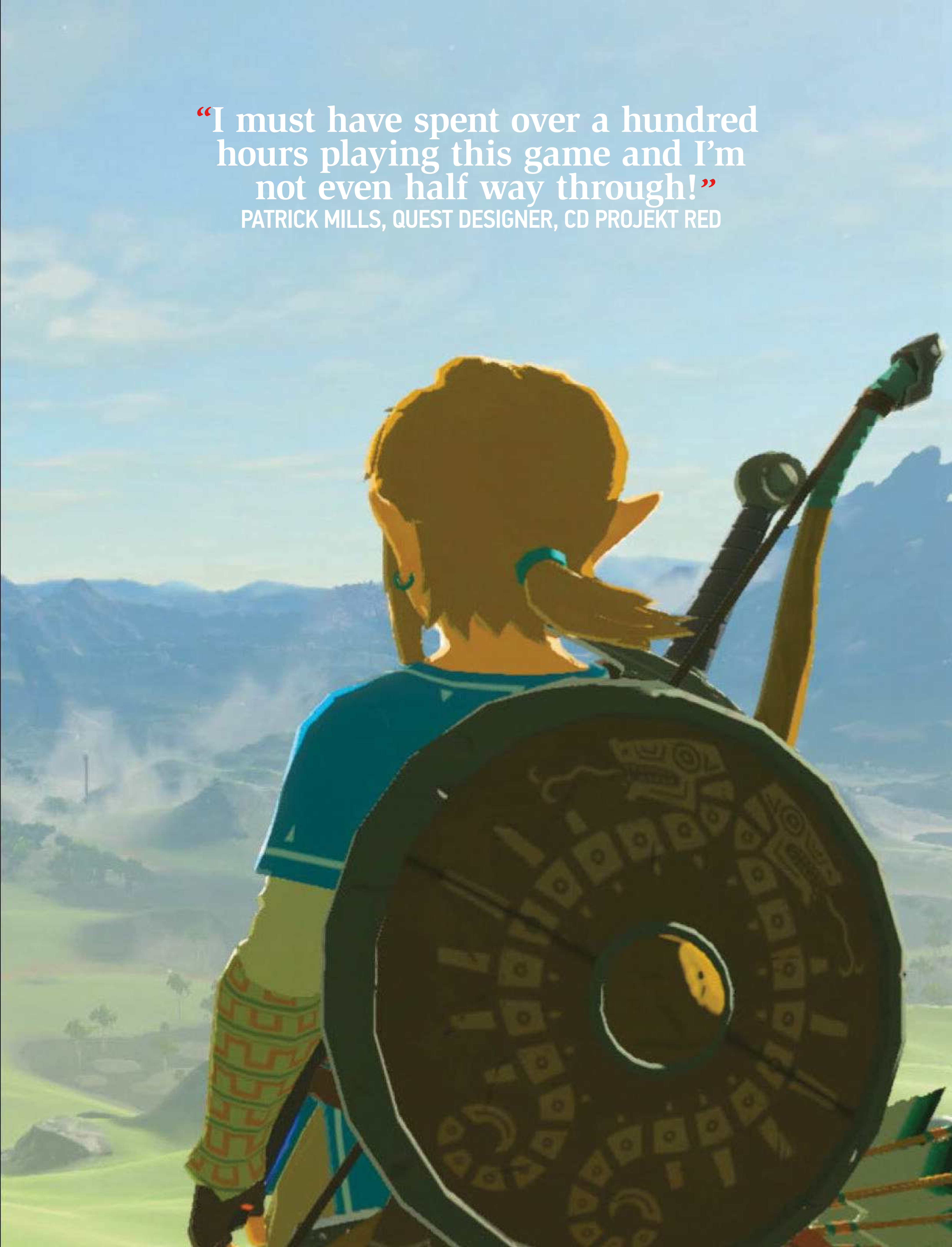


WHY I ♥...

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: BREATH OF THE WILD

PATRICK MILLS,
QUEST DESIGNER, CD PROJEKT RED

I love Breath Of The Wild. *I must have spent over a hundred hours playing this game and, right now, I'm not even half way through it! I'm a player that likes to loot everything. I need to see every corner of the world; I need to pick up every rock and I need to do every quest… I mean, I was playing* The Witcher 3 *for tons of hours for this very reason, just to solve every question mark on the map and I really loved that experience. Those types of games are my favourite ones, I love those types of games. You know, the open-world, pure sandbox experiences that just offer tons of gameplay – experiences that you can spend a couple of months exploring.*



“I must have spent over a hundred hours playing this game and I’m not even half way through!”

PATRICK MILLS, QUEST DESIGNER, CD PROJEKT RED

RETRO

NO.206



96 BEHIND THE SCENES OF QUAKE

John Romero walks us through the making of one of the most legendary shooters in gaming and how its development nearly tore the team apart





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THE RETRO GUIDE TO... SCROLLING BEAT-'EM-UPS

One genre reigned supreme in the arcades during the Eighties and Nineties, but now it's largely forgotten. Join us as we revisit some of the greatest brawlers of all time

THE SCROLLING BEAT-'EM-UP is often considered a long-dead genre, only occasionally revisited and celebrated by games like *Wulverblade* and *Raging Justice*. We'd argue of course that the genre is alive and well, but has simply transformed with the arrival of 3D gaming, morphing to include popular franchises like Dynasty Warriors, Devil May Cry and Bayonetta. Sure they might add bigger stories and deeper combat mechanics, but they share many of the fundamentals of the beat-'em-up genre and are certainly worth exploring if you're a genre fan.

Our focus here though are the classic 2D fighters that typically lit up arcades throughout the Eighties and Nineties and the recent success of the *Capcom Beat 'Em Up Bundle* proves there's still plenty of love for them. With that in mind here are some of the games that have defined the genre over the years, how many have you experienced?

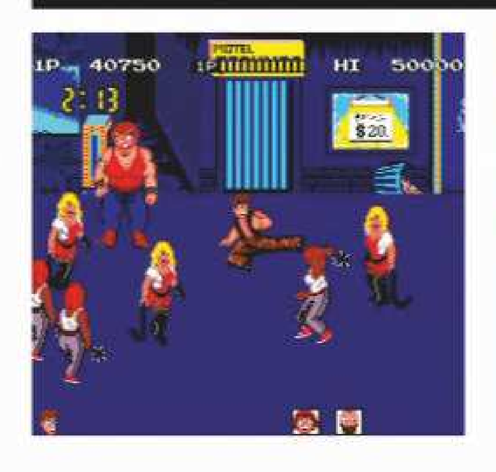




KUNG FU MASTER 1984

IREM

While many will be aware of Irem's classic arcade brawler, not many will realise it's based on an old Jackie Chan film (*Meals On Wheels* if you're asking). It's the classic tale of a boy who loses his girlfriend to an evil crime boss and must fight his way through a heavily guarded temple in order to retrieve her. Most of Thomas's enemies seem keen to hug him to death, so carefully placed kicks and punches are needed to keep them at bay so he can reach the armed bosses at the end of each stage. Its creator, Takashi Nishiyama went on to make some game called *Street Fighter*.





RENEGADE 1986

TECHNOS JAPAN

Yoshihisa Kishimoto's *Renegade* (as it's known in the west) drastically shook up the genre in a big way and introduced a large number of familiar tropes seen in later games. Whereas *Kung Fu Master*'s Thomas is confined to a single plane of movement, the vigilante hero of Renegade has proper 4-way directional control, can run and has a larger range of attacks, which is handy as enemies can take a fair few punches (or knees to the groin) before they go down. More interesting is realising that Kishimoto's game was massively overhauled for its western release. In Japan it's known as *Nekketsu Koha Kunio-kun* and features a high school student brawling against other school-goers who are bullying his friend. Realising that wouldn't fly in the west, many of the characters and locations were massively redrawn to make it more palatable.



DOUBLE DRAGON 1986

TECHNOS JAPAN

Double Dragon builds on the mechanics of *Renegade* by adding a co-operative two-player mode, the ability to pick up a variety of weapons, including baseball bats and whips and an even more expansive move set. Extremely popular on its release, it was ported to numerous home systems and has been succeeded by several sequels.

TARGET: RENEGADE 1988

IMAGINE SOFTWARE

The home conversions of *Renegade* were so popular for Ocean Software that it was eager to create more games. With no options from Technos, Ocean instead licensed its own standalone sequels, with the first being this tremendous offering. In many ways *Target: Renegade* simply copies *Double Dragon* (which was ported to home systems by Melbourne House) by adding a co-operative mode and numerous weapons. It's a far more enjoyable game (at least compared to the *Double Dragon* conversions) thanks to great cartoon graphics and plenty of humour. Interestingly, while both the NES and Commodore 64 versions of *Target: Renegade* feature far superior graphics, they're both let down by a lack of co-op play.





BAD DUDES VS DRAGON NINJA 1988

DATA EAST

Data East's arcade brawler proved very popular on release. After all, who wouldn't want to rescue President Ronnie and share a burger with him in the game's hilarious closing credits? In some ways *Dragon Ninja* feels like a step back for the genre as it lacks the multi-directional movement of games like *Double Dragon* and has a relatively simplistic move set. There's no denying that it's a lot of fun, though thanks to inventive levels (one stage takes place atop a moving truck) a large number of different enemies and some entertaining boss fights, which include a cameo from Karnov, who appeared in his own game the previous year.







THE MIKE LAMB INTERVIEW

The coder on creating Renegade's home sequel

How did *Target: Renegade* come about?
Rather cleverly, Ocean had written the rights to make a sequel to *Renegade* into the original licensing contract. *Renegade* had been very well received and Ocean wanted to cash in. It got a copy of the arcade *Double Dragon* game and we all got to work.

What planning was done?
We had a couple of preliminary meetings to work out what the levels were going to be and what characters would be in them. The game itself wasn't particularly original in design. We copied the two-player idea and weapons from *Double Dragon*. There wasn't a whole a lot of back story – it was basically going through various landscapes beating the crap out of everybody. Jon Woods (Ocean's MD) came up with the idea of using a telephone at the end of each level. I guess he'd been watching *Dirty Harry*.

Tell us about the character and level design.
The design of the characters and backgrounds was mostly the work of the artists. Ron Fowles, the Spectrum *Renegade* artist, had left and I was lucky enough to work with Dawn Drake. Martin MacDonald (the C64 artist) and Dawn collaborated a good deal on the graphics. I can't exactly remember who came up with what. The gameplay was mostly left to me, but Dawn and Martin were good about taking suggestions and I listened to their ideas too. Martin made the boss in the pool hall a rather good caricature of Jon Woods [the Ocean boss]. We didn't have a lot of contact with him and everybody was a little scared of him. He was cool about it though. They came up with pretty much all the characters. Dave Collier wrote the C64 version, and most of the gameplay that I didn't come up with came from Dawn and Martin. Gary Bracey was good for suggestions.

How did you make the game feel so polished?
During the 8-bit era, a lot of games weren't technically very well written. We always prided ourselves at Ocean on keeping the frame-rate up and squeezing as much as we could from the hardware. If something worked well first time, like *Target: Renegade*, it was a sure hit.





GOLDEN AXE 1989

ARCADE

Realising Technos had the urban brawler tied up with its Kunio-kun series, Makoto Uchida looked elsewhere for *Golden Axe*'s inspiration. He found it in the form of the Conan movies, as well as the works of JRR Tolkien, and immediately set to work making something a little different to the beat-'em-up norm. The result, *Golden Axe*, was an instant success and massively built on the work he had already achieved with *Altered Beast*. The three available characters are all different in their fighting styles, there are awesome magic attacks (which can be powered up) to unleash and you can even jump on the back of fire-breathing reptiles and other wondrous beasts.

EACH HERO IS VASTLY DIFFERENT TO EACH OTHER IN TERMS OF ABILITIES AND CAN HANDLE A VARIETY OF WEAPONS THAT INCLUDES LEAD PIPES AND KNIVES



FINAL FIGHT 1989

ARCADE

Originally planned as a sequel to *Street Fighter*, *Final Fight* was soon re-jigged after Capcom saw the success of *Double Dragon*. Like *Golden Axe*, each hero is vastly different to each other in terms of abilities and can handle a variety of weapons that includes lead pipes and knives. Food found in bins can restore energy, while pressing two buttons together creates a powerful (energy sapping) attack, which is handy as you're often swamped by large numbers of enemies. It recently appeared on the *Capcom Beat 'Em Up Bundle*.





RIVER CITY RANSOM 1989

NES

Another Kunio-Kun game that was vastly overhauled and renamed for the west (it's also known as *Street Gangs* in PAL regions). No matter what you know it as, *River City Ransom* remains a fantastic sandbox-style brawler that does away with conventional levels and gives you a whole city to riot in. It's also memorable for the ability to go into a variety of shops where you can buy books and food that will grant new skills, enhance existing ones, or restore health.





GROWL 1991

ARCADE

Taito's four-player brawler has a distinctive eco theme and sees you playing rangers out to protect animals from poachers. For the most part it's a fairly conventional example of the genre, featuring a standard two-button set-up and the ability to pull off a special attack when both are pressed together. So far, so *Final Fight*. The weapons of *Growl* are far more advanced however, adding ranged weapons to the standard fare, which include machineguns, pistols and rocket launchers. It's also possible to receive help from some of the exotic animals that you rescue, which can instantly turn fights around. It most recently appeared on *Taito Legends 2*.

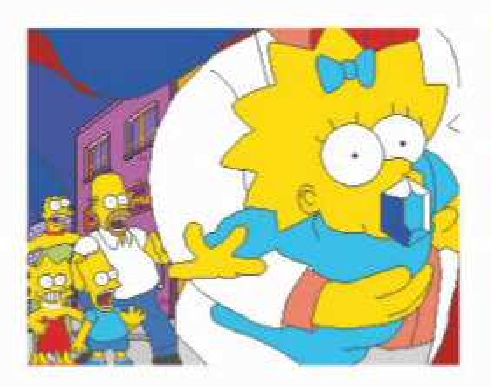




THE SIMPSONS 1991

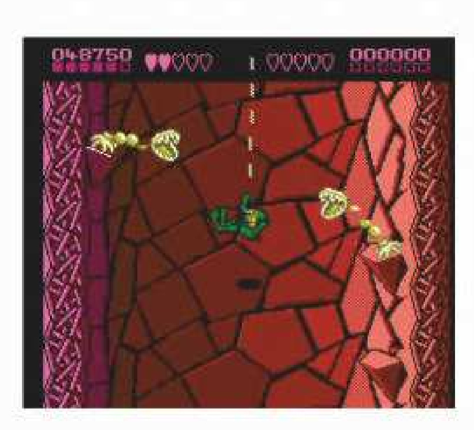
ARCADE

While Capcom faced assault from SNK with one-on-one fighters during the Nineties, it also had to deal with Konami muscling in on its scrolling beat-'em-up territory as well. One of Konami's strongest efforts was *The Simpsons*, which married the popular licence to some truly entertaining and hilarious gameplay. Like *Growl*, *The Simpsons* offers the ability for four players to play at the same time, but it builds on it by also letting them team up to create powerful team attacks. It's otherwise fairly conventional, but is elevated by its sheer humour and numerous references to the TV show. Interestingly, the Japanese version is mechanically superior thanks to more varied weapons, a better scoring system and the ability to level-up your energy meter.









BATTLETOADS 1989

NES

The Battletoads were a direct response from Rare to the world-conquering Ninja Turtles. While the difficulty of *Battletoads* remains as contentious today as it was in 1989 there's no denying that it's a wildly inventive game. It stays close to its beat-'em-up roots, but also throws in innovative boss fights and more traditional platform stages. Numerous sequels followed, including a crossover with the Double Dragon franchise and it most recently popped up on *Rare Replay*.



KNIGHTS OF THE ROUND 1991

CAPCOM

Loosely based on the legends of King Arthur, *Knights Of The Round* is another satisfying Capcom brawler that was recently released on its *Beat 'Em Up Bundle*. While it features plenty of standard tropes, one of its neatest mechanics is a block attack that is not only difficult to master but will punish you if you hold it in place for too long. There's also the ability to break down items, which will often yield more points and energy pick-ups.





PU-LI-RU-LA 1991

TAITO

We're including this for no other reason than it is completely bat shit crazy. Mechanically, it's sound, but unadventurous, with its only novel aspect being random magic attacks that offer different effects whenever you use them. It remains memorable thanks to its truly surreal stage design and enemies, which range from giant anthropomorphic snails and strange fish men to a pair of female legs that open and birth pink elephants (and were mercifully dropped for the game's international release). The easiest way to experience it now is on *Taito Legends*.

MASTER OF DRAGONS

Series creator, Yoshihisa Kishimoto

Tells us about *Double Dragon*'s origins.
Kunio-Kun was firstly for the Japanese market only, but when we decided to export it, we had to spend a lot of time creating new characters and backgrounds, and for Technos Japan it was a very big waste of time and money. So after *Renegade*, when my boss, Kunio Taki, saw I was working on *Kunio-Kun 2*, he told me he wanted me to create a game that would be accepted worldwide. So the concept of the initial *Kunio-Kun 2* became *Double Dragon*. The two-player co-operative gameplay was an idea from our marketing department. It's fun to play together – to help each other to beat the game – and it also allowed game centres to potentially double their incomes.

What inspired *Double Dragon*'s creation?
When I was a child, I saw the Bruce Lee movie *Enter The Dragon*. I became his biggest fan. He made the most incredible action movies in the world. And I wanted to become like him, and create the most incredible action games in the world. So, because Bruce is a worldwide famous actor, he inspired me for my new game. It's like an homage, you know? His nickname is 'little dragon', right? And because the concept of *Kunio-Kun 2* was a two-player game, I decided to create the 'Lee brothers' and call my game *Double Dragon*.

Why did you include weapons?
At the end of the development of *Kunio-Kun*, I noticed a funny graphic detail on the screen: when you hit a guy with a weapon and he falls down, his weapon is on the floor, next to the enemy. One day I just said to myself, 'Hey, wouldn't it be fun if the player could take that weapon and use it against the enemies?'. But because I was too late to program such a new gameplay feature, I decided to use it for *Kunio-Kun 2*.

What technical challenges did you face?
Double Dragon was the first beat-'em-up with real multi-screen-length scrolling, so it was difficult to establish what was best for that. Forced scrolling? Free scrolling? For example, if we used free scrolling then the user would be able to walk directly to the end of the stage without fighting. But because the positions of the enemies are scripted, they appear when you reach certain points. So, if the user doesn't fight, all the enemies will appear on the screen and follow Jimmy and Billy. There will then be too many sprites on the screen and it will make the game freeze. Today, *Double Dragon*'s concept and scrolling looks very natural, but at that time it was a pioneering idea. It took time to make those technical settings look as natural as possible.

How did the final player battle come about?
Well, at first, we had the idea of collaborative gameplay for two players. So, playing *Double Dragon* with a friend was like a fight between human players against a computer. But when you reach the last stage and defeat the last boss, tough guys have to think, 'Okay, we were stronger than this machine, but now we have to know who is the best between us!'. And to know the real winner of the game, we had to make them fight each other. I also wanted the game to have an unexpected ending. It was, I think, a nice idea.



STREETS OF RAGE 2 1992

SEGA

Many consider Sega's sequel to be one of the best scrolling brawlers of all time and we're not going to argue. Everything about it is suitably enhanced over the original, from its amped up aesthetics and beefy sprites, to its improved fighting mechanics. Each of the available characters are vastly different to each other, the weapon system has been subtly refined, while the range of enemies has been improved and offer far more challenge and variety. Oh and it still has one of the greatest soundtracks in the genre, thanks to the sterling work of Yuzo Koshiro. Needless to say the developers of the recently revealed *Streets Of Rage 4* certainly have a high bar to clear.





X-MEN 1992

KONAMI

The scrolling fighter is represented by lots of great superhero entries, but this is perhaps the best. It's mainly notable for its gigantic arcade cab, which can host up to six players at once and uses two monitors (the second is in the cabinet below and reflected upwards) to create an impressive panoramic view to host all the action, but smaller two and four-player versions were also made. The available X-Men include favourites like Wolverine, Storm and Nightcrawler and all of them have unique mutant powers in addition to their standard attacks. The roster of enemies you fight against is equally impressive and includes the likes of Juggernaut, Mystique and Magneto. While a high definition remake of the game was created by Backbone Entertainment in 2010, it's since been delisted and is no longer available to buy, meaning you'll have to visit locations like Arcade Club to experience it in its full glory.





TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES: TURTLES IN TIME 1992

KONAMI

While it started life in arcades, we're focusing on the SNES conversion as we feel it offers slightly more. It lacks the four-player option found in the 1991 arcade game but does add extensive use of Mode 7 (which memorably lets you throw bad guys against the TV screen) a brand new Technodrome stage, new enemies and five additional bosses. Other extras include a time attack mode and the ability to face-off against another player.









SPLATTERHOUSE 3 1993

NAMCO

The third entry in Namco's gory series remains a Mega Drive exclusive (although it appeared in the 2010 reboot as an unlockable bonus). Set in a huge mansion, each level consists of a number of rooms that can be explored in non-linear fashion, ensuring no two playthroughs are the same. There's also a new beastly alter ego for Rick to transform into, hilariously overdramatic cut scenes and alternate endings based on how quickly you complete each stage.





DUNGEONS & DRAGONS: SHADOW OVER MYSTARA 1996

CAPCOM

The pinnacle of Capcom's entries in the genre is easily this incredibly satisfying brawler. It builds on the original *Tower Of Doom* by offering a better combat and inventory system, far more character choices and some spectacular boss fights. There are a huge number of secrets and items to discover, alternate endings and even Street Fighter-styled special moves to pull off. Originally a Saturn exclusive, it was eventually released on seventh gen systems as *Dungeons & Dragons: Chronicles Of Mystara*, alongside *Tower Of Doom*.

GUARDIAN HEROES 1996

TREASURE

Treasure's superb brawler was an essential purchase on the Saturn and proved that there was plenty of life in the traditional scrolling beat-'em-up. It not only features heavy RPG mechanics, but a surprisingly in-depth story, the ability to switch and fight across three layers and a focus on 2D sprites, which was unusual at the time of release. In addition to multiple endings and various routes to unlock, longevity comes in the form of an entertaining verses mode that caters for up to six players. The Xbox version (shown here) was released in 2011.





VIEWTIFUL JOE 2003

CAPCOM

Capcom's cel-shaded brawler was original one of five exclusive GameCube games, the others being *P.N.03*, *Killer 7*, *Resident Evil 4* and the cancelled *Dead Phoenix*. Inspired by a love of films and comic book heroes, it shakes up the genre considerably by allowing Joe to activate numerous effects like speeding up and slowing down the action providing he has enough energy in his VFX Gauge. It was eventually ported to PS2 in 2004 and featured Dante as a playable character.

CASTLE CRASHERS 2008

THE BEHEMOTH

Not content with delivering homage to the run-and-gun genre with *Alien Hominid*, The Behemoth later turned its eye to the scrolling beat-'em-up. The result is an entertaining four-player brawler with distinctive visuals (the artwork is once again handled by Dan Paladin) light RPG mechanics and plenty of humour. It also features two mini games: an arena mode, and a competition to consume food as quickly as possible. It's currently available in remastered form on current systems.





MURAMASA: THE DEMON BLADE 2009

VANILLAWARE

This is arguably one of the most exquisite looking games we're covering and it's a crying shame that so few people have experienced it. Many seemed to give it a wide berth on the Wii and a port to Sony's Vita did little to raise its profile. Drawing heavily on Japanese folklore, *Muramasa* is a tremendously satisfying slash-'em-up with a complex combat system, fantastical looking bosses and over 100 different blades to craft and use. It's a superb game that's crying out for a remaster.

IT EASILY MANAGES TO CAPTURE THE VITALITY AND HUMOUR OF BRYAN LEE O'MALLEY'S ORIGINAL COMICS

SCOTT PILGRIM VS THE WORLD: THE GAME 2010

UBISOFT MONTREAL

We feel a little cruel covering Ubisoft's game, as it's no longer digitally available. It's worth highlighting though, for although it has an annoying reliance on grinding the same levels over and over to level up your character, it easily manages to capture the vitality and humour of Bryan Lee O'Malley's original comics. It shares numerous elements with the *River City Ransom* games and sports a truly exceptional chiptune soundtrack.









WULVERBLADE 2012

FULLY ILLUSTRATED/DARKWIND MEDIA

While it's clearly inspired by classics such as *Golden Axe* and *Final Fight*, *Wulverblade* is very much its own game and a sterling example of a modern scrolling beat-'em-up. It not only looks stunning, but has an excellent story too, which is steeped in British myth and history. Deliciously gory and with three distinct characters to master, *Wulverblade* really is something special.

BEHIND THE SCENES

QUAKE

id Software's Quake took first-person shooters to another level, but its development tore the company apart. FPS legend John Romero tells games™ how Quake became his id swan song

Released: 1996
Format: PC, Sega Saturn, Nintendo 64
Publisher: id Software
Key Staff: John Romero (director/desiner), American Mcgee (designer), Sandy Petersen (designer) John Carmack(programmer), Michael Abrash (programmer), Adrian Carmack (artist), Kevin Cloud (artist), Trent Reznor (composer)



John Romero currently runs the independent game studio Romero Games with his wife Brenda in Galway, Ireland.

WHILE MANY GAMERS DIDN'T BECOME AWARE OF ID SOFTWARE UNTIL THE RELEASE OF THE FIRM'S GENRE-DEFINING FPS *DOOM* IN 1993, ID HAD ACTUALLY BEEN DEVELOPING FIRST-PERSON SHOOTERS FOR SEVERAL YEARS BEFORE THE ARRIVAL OF ITS BREAKTHROUGH TITLE. Further more, prior to id's formation the company's founders had spent close to a decade in games development honing their respective skills on an impressive number of releases.

After conquering mainstream gaming with *Doom*, id next produced a well-received sequel in 1994 with *Doom II* and, buoyed by the follow-up's success, the nine-man team moved on to their next project – *Quake* – with a belief that they were unstoppable, as id co-founder John Romero recalls. "We had been making games for over ten years before *Wolfenstein*, so we were already experts before we got together," Romero beams. "We used to make games in two months – we made 11 games in 1991. So we were fast. *Wolfenstein* was four people, and it took us four months to make. We got *Doom* done mostly with only five people, and then we got a sixth person during the last few months. With *Quake*, there were only nine of us, but by that time everyone on the team was awesome."

Quake embraces the vertical plane with set pieces like spiralling ramps complete with ground-level grunts and roof-top snipers.

Beyond *Quake*'s striking name, the well-oiled machine known as id further differentiated its latest concept from the Doom franchise when one of Romero's fellow designers introduced him to the Gothic horror writings of cult author H. P. Lovecraft. "Sandy Petersen was a huge H. P. Lovecraft fan," Romero remembers. "I had heard his name, but I thought he was just a classic writer. Sandy basically said: 'Oh, no, no.' He gave me these Chaosium books, and when I read them I was mind-destroyed; I was just blown away by the monsters. So *Quake* was *very* inspired by H. P. Lovecraft, as I'd just been exposed to him."

But in order to do justice to Lovecraft's nightmarish fiction, *Quake*'s newfound aesthetic would need to be underpinned by cutting-edge tech, as Romero and his *Quake* team soon became aware of. "The idea was that we were going to have a full-3D engine that was on the Internet and was scriptable in its own language," Romero explains. "We had never done this before, so it was a big technical undertaking, and since we were doing so much new with this engine we thought: 'Well, what can we do that's new in game design? Let's not tie ourselves to what we've done in the past with military themes, but lets maybe get closer to D&D with *Quake*'."

However, the sheer complexity of building the tech for *Quake* resulted in a situation where its engine continually evolved over the course of a year, which hardly helped Romero's efforts to manage the game's design process. "There were ideas of abstract environments – medieval-type stuff – but there wasn't any written-down design for *Quake* during its first year," Romero says of the game's initial design push. "So by November the team was really burned out trying to make a game that didn't really have an identity. They were making a lot of levels and having to delete them and start over because the engine was getting better. But when we got to the end of November, the engine was ready, and so now we could actually design a game around it."



"AFTER A MONTH OR TWO CRANKING OUT LEVELS, I HAD TO DITCH THE RPG STUFF AND JUST MAKE IT A PURE SHOOTER"
JOHN ROMERO



■ The exits to *Quake*'s levels are typically guarded by one or more sub-bosses rather than a single all-powerful boss.











Quake may not be the earth-shattering game it was hyped to be, but the new game engine and other elements make it both a blast to play and a worthy successor to the Doom throne

GamePro, 1996

With *Quake*'s underlying tech finally in place, Romero was ready to move on from what he viewed as R&D into full development and to create a game design that matched the innovation of id's recently completed engine. Unfortunately, his exhausted design team felt otherwise. "We had a big company meeting to decide whether we were going to slap Doom-style weapons in and make it a classic FPS, or experiment with some new game design ideas," Romero recollects. "Some people in the team just said: 'You know what? I'm broken, and I can't do it anymore.' They wanted to just throw Doom-style weapons in there and call it a day. I mean, obviously we were going to make them as good as we could, but we weren't going to be pushing game design in a new direction. So when that decision was made I basically decided that I was going to be leaving when the game was over."

But far from letting this decision sour his approach to *Quake*'s design, Romero instead tried to inject the maximum innovation possible into the project's best level designs while respecting the framework established by previous id first-person shooters. "Basically my job after that meeting was to design the game around what we had at that point that made sense and was good," Romero considers. "The guiding light was that we had four 'dimensions' – each one designed by one of the designers. So I designed something very similar to what the game came out to, but a more complex version that had more story elements. But after a month or two of us cranking out levels, I had to simplify it even further because of how long it was taking us. So I basically had to ditch the RPG stuff and just make it a pure shooter."

Of course, without the story elements that Romero had intended to connect *Quake*'s wildly differing levels together with, the developer was left with something of a design challenge, which he ultimately resolved by making his game's hero an inter-dimensional, time-travelling soldier. "I was like: 'Ok, we need to tie all these episodes together somehow; somehow you're going between episodes,'" remembers Romero. "'Well, why aren't you a military dude?' And if you were a military dude you needed to be in a military environment and to leave that military environment to enter these 'dimensions.' So I was like: 'I need to come up with a teleporter for this game that doesn't just take you to somewhere in space, but somewhere in *time* to different dimensions.' So I came up with the name 'Slipgate,' and told the artists: 'This is what I'm building. Can you make textures that fit this?'"

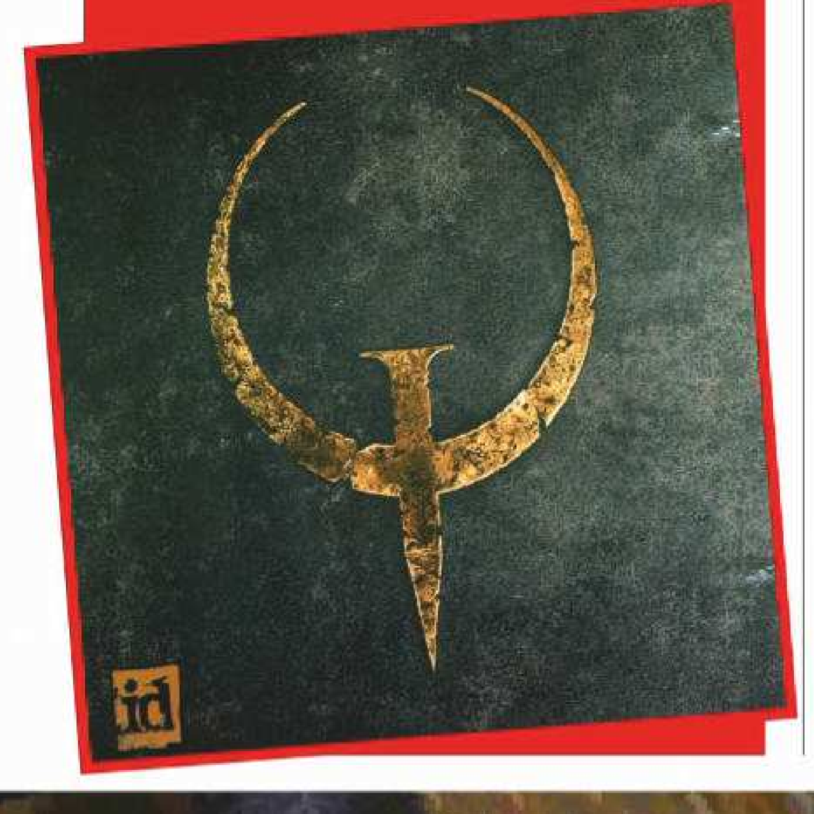
Undeterred by the back-to-basics approach forced on *Quake*'s design process, Romero opted to focus on the innovations made possible by the game's highly impressive engine, and in particular its ability to render truly three-dimensional environments. "The goal of *Quake*'s level design was that we needed to explore verticality as much as possible," Romero enthuses, "so you could be under a bridge but be on top of that bridge later. That was a massive change from anything that we had done before, so designing vertically was *really* important. I had a rule for the designers that if they created a room in *Quake* and it could be replicated in *Doom* then they had failed. Every room needed to show the dimensionality of the engine. We were forcing the player to worry more about the environment on multiple planes instead of like with *Doom* where your plane was always the horizontal. So we were pushing players into the next dimension by enforcing a vertical design."

One of the most obvious outcomes of *Quake*'s vertical level design came in the form of platforming challenges, which Romero and his team integrated into their game's core objectives of continually powering-up and completing levels by finding their exits. "Even on the very first level, you got into a dark room where you were coming down ramps, and there was one hundred health up there. The only way to get it was to do some crazy platform-hopping," Romero says of an early vertical challenge in *Quake*. "There were little pegs sticking out of the walls, and if you could jump from peg to peg and get all the way up there

QUAKE'S NIN SOUNDTRACK

ROMERO ON NINE INCH NAILS AND ITS ATMOSPHERIC QUAKE SOUNDTRACK

"We wanted to see if there were more opportunities for id to see its property made into movies or books or something. So we contacted ICM in Hollywood, which is like an agency that represents companies and connects people. We then found out that Nine Inch Nails was connected with ICM because they were addicted to *Doom* – they even had four-player death match on their tour bus! So ICM just said: 'Why don't we just introduce you guys?' Even the idea that we were going to meet Trent Reznor was enough for us to go: 'Why can't we see if he's interested in making music for *Quake*?' So we talked to him, and yep, he was interested. We also told him that we needed some player screams for damage and stuff like that, so all *Quake*'s player sounds were Trent Reznor! In the meantime he got us MP3s from a friend of his who did ambient atmospheric stuff to see if we thought he should go in that direction. So we made the *Quake* engine stream MP3s while we were playing the game. Eventually we got the music from NIN, but it took a long time to get the approvals. There had to be 12 signatures to get the rights. One of the biggest delaying points was that the music had to be CD audio tracks. They didn't want us to make it into a format that people could copy. So we were like: 'Seriously? So now people are only going to hear the music if they have the CD in the drive? They're going to install the game and put the CD away.' So we were like: 'Great! Now hardly anybody is going to hear this.' But we had to do it or we weren't going to get the music."





Deadly interactive environments like moving spiked walls are scattered throughout *Quake*'s stages, and are often triggered when you're under fire.

you could get the health. There was another level with a room that had these pieces of stone that came out of the wall that you had to jump up the sides of the wall on. It was like going up stairs, but you had to platform jump to get up and out of the room."

More sophisticated platforming standards followed as the *Quake* team implemented impressive set pieces spanning everything from retracting drawbridges to deadly elevators. "One of the things that we got to do in *Quake* was take the player on a ride," says Romero. "So they could walk onto a platform and it would just start moving. One thing that I did was take them in an elevator. When they pressed the button they were locked in, it started going down and it took them underwater, and all of a sudden they started dying. It was perfectly timed for them to come up out of the water at the end and pick up health, but they were panicking the whole time because they didn't know what was going to happen!"



"WE WERE FORCING THE PLAYER TO WORRY ABOUT MULTIPLE PLANES, [UNLIKE] DOOM WHERE YOUR PLANE WAS ALWAYS THE HORIZONTAL"
JOHN ROMERO



Romero's elevator ride was far from *Quake*'s only use of an underwater environment; in fact, the *Quake* team filled their game with sub-aquatic challenges. These favoured gameplay over realism and allowed players to be as trigger-happy underwater as on land. "The only limitation was that if you had the Lightning Gun underwater you were dead if you used it – unless you were invulnerable," Romero points out. "Gameplay was totally a priority. The only difference was that you moved a little slower than on land. But no one would have wanted to go in the water if we had lessened their ability to shoot the weapons. So it made it way more fun to be able to just do what you did on land."

This thinking also followed through to *Quake*'s hidden areas and levels, which were as likely to be found at

TAKING DEATHMATCHES ONLINE

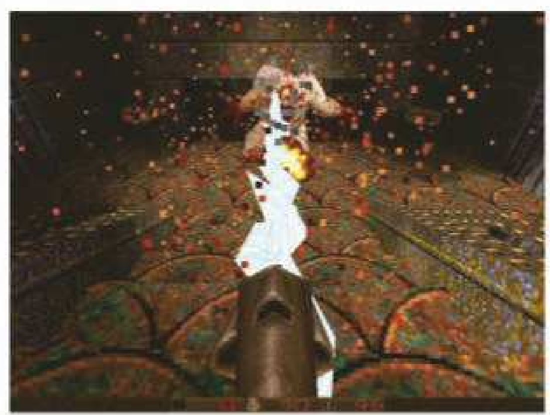
HOW JOHN ROMERO USED THE INTERNET TO AVOID 2AM PHONE CALLS

"The problem was that it was two in the morning, and I wanted a death match. During the *Doom* days you called your friend on the telephone and said: 'Get your modem on. It's 2am, let's death match!' But later I found out about a very primitive program called DWANGO that connected DOS clients when they called into a server in Houston. So I worked with the DWANGO guys, and I programmed an entirely new client that you could start games with and talk to people in a lobby. And then when we designed *Quake* for multiplayer, we made it work on the Internet natively instead of calling a computer with your modem. That was obviously the future."





Quake's zombie-infested graveyard initially feels overwhelming, but once you find the Quad Damage power-up the tables are turned.





the bottom of murky lakes as in equally obscure above-water locations. "Putting secret areas in the game made it replayable," argues Romero. "It made it so players would search all over the place and spend more time on the levels, which would help them understand them more. Typically, we hid the next most powerful weapon in a secret area so that you could get it early. There was also an exit to a whole secret level somewhere, and if you could find that exit then you had found an entire level of cool stuff."

Equally cool creatures were also being created for *Quake*, with aesthetics inspired by the macabre imagination of author H. P. Lovecraft, including a living thunderstorm that id dubbed the Shambler. "We likened it to an Arch-vile in *Doom*," Romero muses. "He was basically a really tough monster in the first episode – the real boss was Chthon at the end. The Shambler was still really tough in the other episodes, but we gave him away in the first episode, not as a boss but as a mini-boss. We gave the player the Shambler to go against because maybe they would think that it was the boss, but then we *really* showed them what a boss was in Chthon."

Given the threat posed by Chthon, not to mention *Quake*'s other nightmarish bosses, it must have been tempting to demand legendary firefights of players in order to defeat them but, as with previous design decisions, Romero chose innovation over expectation. "Chthon was unlike any boss that we'd had in any of our games," the designer reasons. "He was a huge lava creature that you couldn't just shoot to death, you know, you had to actually use lightning against him. So you were using the *environment* against the boss. Shub-Niggurath was the ultimate 'how do I kill that thing?', which you did just by paying attention to the environment and what was going on, and trying to figure out how you would kill him."

Unlike *Quake*'s bosses, the game's less challenging opponents could be shot to death, although the weapons Romero's team designed for their game included a couple of particularly visceral bullet-free options. "The nail-gun was one of the first weapons that we created," Romero reveals. "We hadn't seen one in a game, and we were joking around that it would be hilarious to just shoot nails at people! The axe was basically because in the first design you were going to be hatcheting characters. So the axe was a holdover from the medieval design, and the nail-gun was a holdover from the experimentation during the medieval phase."

An equally gruesome but more elemental instrument of death followed, as *Quake*'s medieval origins prompted Romero to dream up a gun that fired bolts of lightning. "I thought it was different and powerful because of the way that you could hold people up in the air with it," says the developer, revealing his wicked side, "and you could use it really fast. The really cool thing for me was how it could be like a BFG as well. I thought: 'Well, if it affects everyone in the room, what if you jump in the water and discharge and that blows up everyone in the water?' We didn't have anything like that, and it felt like a really good way to make a multi-function weapon."

In order to compliment *Quake*'s imaginative set of weapons, Romero and his design team also devised a range of power-ups, including one to enhance the weaponry that subsequently became synonymous with *Quake* thanks to the arrival of the game's box-art. "Originally it was just going to be a rune that had 4X on it," Romero discloses. "It gave you whatever your weapon's

> A GAMING EVOLUTION Doom > Quake > Quake II



Although far from id's first FPS, *Doom* was responsible for bringing the developer, the shareware model and FPSs to the mass market.



As well as addressing *Quake*'s slim narrative and uneven design, the sequel used cutting-edge visual effects to differentiate itself from its predecessor.



Between firefights *Quake* sets agility tests such as activating floor-tiles while avoiding wall-mounted nail guns.





damage was times-four for 30 seconds, and that was it. Then when we got the *Quake* logo it obviously had to be 'Quad Damage' because of the 'Q.' So we made that model. The Quad was like: 'What if we could do the Berserk from *Doom*, but on everything?' With *Doom*, you picked up the Berserk pack, and from the time you picked it up until you were dead your fist would destroy stuff. So my thought was: 'What if you could pick up something that gave you crazy amounts of power like the Berserk for every weapon you had, but on a 30-second timer?'"

"SHUB-NIGGURATH WAS THE ULTIMATE 'HOW DO I KILL THAT THING?', WHICH YOU DID JUST BY PAYING ATTENTION TO THE ENVIRONMENT"
JOHN ROMERO

In the months following id's final changes to *Quake*, the game released to positive reviews that only fell slightly short of the dizzy expectations created by the pre-release buzz that had surrounded the game. *Quake* did go on to sell in its millions, however, regardless of the critical response, although Romero stuck to his decision to part ways with id Software, and so didn't see a penny of profit for his work on the title. "I knew the game was going to do really well," reflects Romero. "For a whole year before it came out there were articles all over the place and magazines covers – everyone was waiting for *Quake*. People knew it was going to be the next thing. So it was great to have that kind of hype. When it came out and everybody was playing it, it was great for me because I was putting together a new company, and you always want to have a success when you're trying to do that. The negatives were that I didn't actually get any money from *Quake* because I was gone, but the positives were that I got to leave after making a really successful game."

John Romero remains equally philosophical about his last, and arguably greatest, id FPS when asked for his thoughts on *Quake* now, although the fact that the developer's hopes for the game were repeatedly scaled back is still a matter of some regret, as is the knowledge that *Quake* was essentially responsible for breaking up the original id team. "I would have had a more cohesive design and spent more time during 1995 getting a design down that was more solid and could have improved upon the FPS instead of just making another FPS," Romero admits. "It also really needed to have better weapon balance, with more focus on the weak weapons. But I'm super proud of *Quake*; I think it's a great game. It's just too bad that it tore id apart because it was so hard to make. After *Quake*, within six months of its release, half the company was gone."

WHAT THEY SAID...

Quake deserves every bit of advance praise it has received. If you're into action games, and even if you're not, you should be playing Quake right now – it's as good as PC gaming gets

GameSpot, 1996



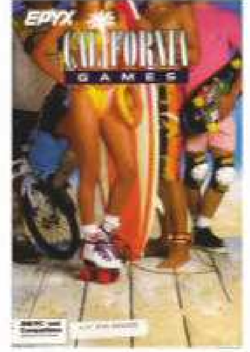


INTERVIEW

MATT HOUSEHOLDER

From Atari and Activision to Epyx and Blizzard, Matt Householder has worked for some of the biggest names in videogame history

SELECT GAMEOGRAPHY



California Games [1988] Creator/ designer/ producer



Diablo II [2000] Senior producer



Kitchen Scramble [2013] Creator/ designer

How and when did you become interested in playing videogames?
The first videogame I recall playing was *Pong* in 1975. There was one in the corner of our laundromat in Kent, Ohio, and my wife and I tried it a couple of times. It cost a quarter per play and, being poverty-level students, we definitely preferred dry clothes to playing it. In fact, we'd bring along a Mastermind game set to play as our clothes washed and dried. Then, in 1979, quality coin-ops such as *Asteroids* and *Space Invaders* started appearing in arcades, bowling alleys, and convenience stores. I enjoyed them as well as *Galaxian*, *Tail Gunner*, *Defender*, *Robotron: 2084*, *Xybots*, *Space Harrier* and *Xenophobe*.

When did you learn to code?
That was at Kent State University in 1976 when I attended a class in BASIC for Physics graduate students even though I wasn't majoring in Physics. The next quarter, I took another Physics class – this one on designing lab instruments, using op-amps to build analogue computers. Over the preceding summer, the teaching assistant had built some MITS Altair 8800 microcomputer kits, so digital computers, and within two years I'd built my first computer from a kit, a Poly-88 by Polymorphic Systems. I taught myself the 8080 instruction set and I then wrote (and hand-assembled) a program in machine language to run the cellular automata simulation, *Life*, by John Conway, on its primitive graphics card.

Your first published game was the coin-op *Krull* by Gottlieb Amusement Games. When did you start work at Gottlieb?
After my Kent years, and having built my own home computer, I transferred to the University of Michigan where I earned a BSE (Comp E) in two years straight. I took a job in January 1980 with Bell Labs in Naperville, Illinois, where I hoped I would eventually find a job programming coin-op videogames.

It turned out that Bell Labs was an incredibly stodgy, dull place to work, so I went out daily for lunch and spent an extra hour or two at a nearby videogame arcade. That fall, Bell Labs sent me to Northwestern University where I earned an MSc in Computer Science in one year. Then, in the summer of 1981 I met the VP of Engineering for GDI (Gaming Devices, Inc.). He offered me a job as a systems programmer on the Motorola 68000-based video poker machine they were designing. I wrote 68000 code for the prototype hardware: RAM/ROM tests, graphics algorithms and poker game logic.

CALIFORNIA GAMES BROKE THE MOULD OF THE STODGY OLYMPIC GAMES METAPHOR THAT HAD INSPIRED IT

I worked with another programmer there, Chris Krubel, for about a year before we both decided that GDI was unlikely to ship its poker videogame hardware. We left together in 1982 to work at Gottlieb, designing and programming my first published game in 1983, *Krull* on Gottlieb's Intel 8088-based hardware.

So how did you end up working on *Moon Patrol* for the ColecoVision?
After the coin-op business crashed in 1983, Atari offered me a job converting coin-op hits to the Colecovision. Unfortunately, just as I was wrapping up *Moon Patrol* in early



BOLT FROM THE BLUE

"During *Winter Games'* final days of development, I felt the Biathlon needed more user interaction and challenge. It was just too easy to push the fire button – bang, bang, bang – and get three quick bullseyes in target-shooting. I asked Richard Ditton, Action Graphics' designer/programmer, to add realistic bolt-action simulation, where the player must eject each spent shell and load a new one for the next shot. He did it in minutes (high 'bang for the buck'), adding realism and challenge."

ALIEN INFLUENCE

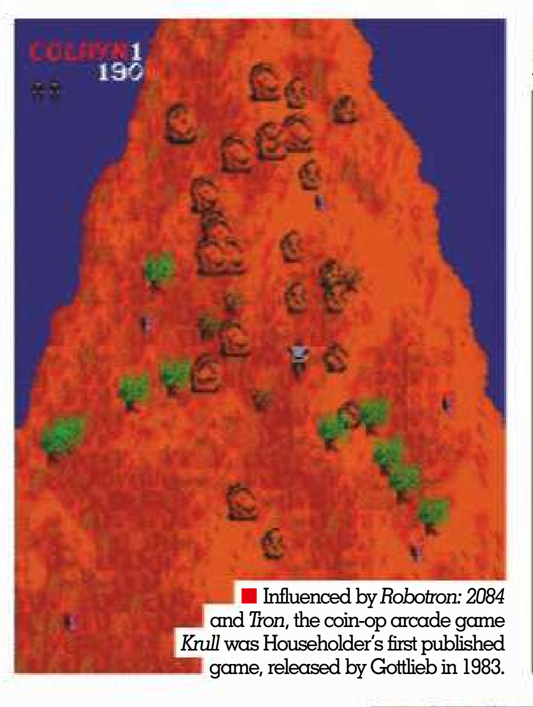
" *Space Invaders* made me realise I could have a career designing and programming videogames (and I'm sure I'm not the only one). That is, I would not have to work for some boring computer hardware or software company. I decided to move to Chicago, the centre of the US coin-op game business, once I'd finished my degree. "



Visual Concepts' 1994 platformer *Lester The Unlikely* for the SNES saw Householder credited as the producer for the publisher DTMC.



Having worked on high-profile games for Blizzard North, Householder was in a good position to playtest *Warcraft III: Reign Of Chaos*.



Influenced by *Robotron: 2084* and *Tron*, the coin-op arcade game *Krull* was Householder's first published game, released by Gottlieb in 1983.



Originally created for the Atari Lynx, Householder is credited as the producer of the Mega Drive version of *Todd's Adventures In Slime World*.



Created by the developer Interplay Productions, *The Adventures of Rad Gravity* was produced by Householder, Joe Ybarra, Scott Benfield and Tom Sloper for Activision.



Householder is credited as the director of product development and the writer of 2007's *Hellgate: London*.



Together with his wife, Candi Strecker, Householder came up with the idea for *California Games*, which he produced for Epyx.

In 1984, Atari stopped publishing on the Colecovision, so I made some EPROM versions I dubbed *Matt Patrol*, which eventually leaked to the internet. In 2014, some fans hacked my ROM's graphics to make it look more like *Moon Patrol*.

Were you a fan of the ColecoVision?
It was a surprisingly capable console with a fast Z80 processor, flexible graphics hardware, and a good sound chip (the GI8910). It could also be expanded into a full home computer (the Adam).

You went on to worked on the Epyx Games series: how did you land that job?
After *Moon Patrol*, I'd worked on the Atari side of the short-lived Amiga chip license. I then survived the Jack Tramiel takeover, when 95 per cent of the staff was fired, but I left Atari when it became clear that I would not be working on games in the future there and I took a job at Epyx as a project manager, in the summer of 1985, where I was soon handed the responsibility to manage the development of *Winter Games*, making sure it shipped in time for the Christmas selling season. It was a rescue job because *Winter Games* had been contracted out to an Illinois game developer Action Graphics that Epyx was failing to make payroll. Luckily for me and Epyx, the developers were dedicated to finishing the game, hoping for royalty payments later.

How big a deal was the Epyx Games series for the company?
It was a major money maker and it provided the steam to expand from 20 employees in 1985 to over 200 in 1988 when I left. *Summer Games* had been a huge hit for Epyx in 1984 and it was quickly followed by *Summer Games II* in early 1985. The graphics, animation and control of the games on the Commodore 64 were outstanding. Epyx put a team of programmers on it along with artists and animators, allowing each event to be developed in parallel, thus achieving a high level of gameplay polish in a very short development time-frame. It capitalised on the peak market-interest in Olympic-style sports games.

You then took the concept further with *California Games*, didn't you?
Yes, the success of *Winter Games* led to my producer/designer roles in *World Games* and *California Games*. For *California Games*, I'd written up a brief design document outlining the game, calling it Rad Sports. A few weeks later, I presented it at a company meeting and it was overwhelmingly approved for full development – marketing, sales, programmers, artists and management all wanted it immediately.

For both games, I wrote up the core controls and play sequences, sketched the game screen views, then consulted as needed with the artists and programmers who were the ultimate designers and finishers. We deviated from the actual sports' rules and play when we thought they would not translate well to the controls, screen, or the ability of the graphics hardware of home computers, which included the quite weak Apple II. Caber Toss in *World Games* was a good example of how far we would deviate from the sport. I was also really pleased how well the Apple II version of *California Games* turned out, especially the BMX event's scrolling effect. Kevin Norman, designer/programmer, had worked out an ingenious kind of delta-compression technique to give the illusion of horizontal scrolling by simply lengthening and shortening the vertical "logs" that made up the edges of the track.

At what point did you join Blizzard and did you enjoy working on PC games?
I joined Blizzard North in December of 1996, a few weeks before *Diablo* was finished, but I'd already worked on several PC games at Epyx. *California Games* was released on PC in 1988, for instance, and, when I returned to Epyx in 1990 after they had gone bankrupt following the Atari Lynx debacle, my first original PC title was Epyx's *Getaway Entertainment 6 Pack*. Designed for early MSDOS laptop computers, it had only black and white graphics and I created the game *Cascade*, a ground-breaking prototype for Match-3 games).

JUST AS I WAS WRAPPING UP MOON PATROL IN EARLY 1984, ATARI STOPPED PUBLISHING ON THE COLECOVISION

What did you think when you first got to see *Diablo*?
Blizzard North (known as Condor then), showed me *Diablo* in development in early 1996 and I realised instantly that it would be big hit, Later that year, when a demo was released on Microsoft's Win95 Games Sampler, everyone who played it realised it too. I ended up working on every version of Diablo before *Diablo III*.

What features did you work on that you felt particularly proud of?
Well, I "discovered" Matt Uelmen, the musician/sound designer who made a huge contribution to the atmosphere and emotional content of Diablo. He's not really a feature, but I am proud of my helping him get a job with Condor. I also recruited and hired post-Diablo Blizzard North staff when I was the producer for *Diablo II*, but my hands-on achievements included writing most of the dialogue in the game, managing the quest and localisation systems, managing the sound department, and creating the "!" interface/icon system for NPC interaction, which is a whole story of its own.

Blizzard was building a strong reputation. What were the secrets to its success?
A near-insane devotion to quality, relentless play-testing by developers who actually like games, and a willingness to scrap anything and re-do it at any time.

You've also worked on *World Of Warcraft*. Did that carry a certain responsibility?
I was a member of the *WoW* "strike-team" and it had adopted *Diablo II*'s "!" interaction system – but not because of my influence. I worked more on Starcraft and *Warcraft III* (mostly play-testing) than I did on *WoW*, though.

Why did you leave for Flagship Studios?
I left Blizzard North for Flagship Studios one year after the founders (Dave Brevik, Max Schaefer, Erich Schaefer) had left in a surprise resignation. That is another story but I joined them and other ex-Blizzard North people to build two divisions – Flagship and Ping0. We were hoping for a hit, but struck out.

Did it feel strange working for a startup having previously worked for long established names?
I had never been so early in a startup with significant stock options along with the crushing demand for rapid growth. Epyx in 1985 felt somewhat like that, but I had no "upside" in its success. After Flagship, I joined Zynga and later Playdom (acquired by Disney), both of which were insane startup pressure-cookers in social games.

How has the gaming industry evolved?
During my 35-plus years in the gaming industry, it had gone from a sort of minor hobby to a worldwide industry that makes (a few) billionaires. My personal key moments were the times I realised I was creating a hit game: *California Games*, *Diablo II*, and most recently *Kitchen Scramble* (a Facebook hit from 2013).

Do you still find videogaming to be an exciting industry?
After leaving Playdom, I joined forces with a programming partner, Jeremy Kassis, to create *Gabble* and *Word Nerd* for Facebook and mobile. Word games make a little money, but not enough, so I went back to my electrical engineering skills to repair classic audio equipment and now I work at home – no commute, no employees and no boss!





Many players were first introduced to *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater* through a free demo given away as a promotion at Pizza Hut in 1999.

GAME CHANGERS

TONY HAWK'S PRO SKATER

Developer: Neversoft **Publisher:** Activision **Released:** 30 September 1999 **System:** PSone, Nintendo 64, Dreamcast

Looking back at one of the most important licensed sports titles and the series it helped to spawn

JUST HOW MUCH did Neversoft's take on the tricks and friendly competition of skateboarding go on to influence the concept of the wider sandbox playground experience in gaming? It's hard to quantify, but we're going to say quite a lot. It may have been driven by specific cultural and sporting traditions to create the game that it did with *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater*, but through it and the games that would follow, it helped to develop a benchmark for what it means to create a fun, anarchic and free-form space to just play in an open-world game.

And all of this because it decided to stick skate parks at the end of race courses in an early test of a skateboarding game, only to realise that – rather than just being a place to kill time until the other racers had finished – this was where most players wanted to spend their time. But we're getting ahead of ourselves. Neversoft's journey to making the most iconic and cherished of action sports titles and series in gaming was an odd one, and it's interesting to retell it, if only for context.

NOT JUST A SKATEBOARDING SIMULATION, BUT A FULLER SKATEBOARDING EXPERIENCE

Neversoft was a relative unknown before being signed up by Activision to work on a Bruce Willis-led shooter called *Apocalypse* and a skateboarding prototype. It had only released one game after a series of other projects were cancelled or fell away for various reasons, but in the race for teams who could adapt to the new 3D era in the late-Nineties, Neversoft was clearly capable of handling itself.

Since *Apocalypse*'s 3D engine seemed to work pretty well, it was utilised for the production of this skateboarding

THE RISE AND FALL OF THE TONY HAWK'S SERIES

THE GAMES THAT MARKED THE BEST AND WORST MOMENTS OF THE FRANCHISE



TONY HAWK'S UNDERGROUND

★ In many ways, *Underground* represented the incredible crossover power of the Tony Hawk's series up to this point, tapping into the growing *Jackass*-style culture of extreme reality and pop-punk sensibility even more than its early releases had done. It was anarchic, ridiculous and still a lot of fun to play.



TONY HAWK: RIDE

★ Activision's ill-fated attempts to break into the peripheral and motion-gaming booms of the age would ultimately send the Tony Hawk's gaming brand down a dark path as it seemingly surrendered the simulation market to EA's *Skate* and lost much of its core fanbase as a result. This skateboard peripheral-based game just wasn't much fun.



TONY HAWK'S PRO SKATER 5

★ One last attempt to put the series back on its original path of fun, accessible sports action ultimately seems to have been the final nail in the coffin. *Pro Skater 5* was attempting to call back to the simple pleasures of the original games, but delivered it with such bland level design and poor graphical quality that it left us wondering why anyone bothered.

project, still yet to have a name or any licensing attached to it. Early versions were heavily inspired by *Top Skater* from Sega and *Street Sk8er* from EA, with levels that were constructed as downhill races, but also encouraged tricks along the way. As we mentioned before, Neversoft smartly designed small skate parks at the bottom of the tracks with the intention that players could kill time there while they waited for others to finish the course. In testing, however, this proved to be where the most time was spent by players, so the team pivoted towards making it the focus of the experience, embracing the feedback it was getting from its potential fans.

This was a massive breakthrough for a number of reasons, one of the more important being that skating around a park or in abandoned spaces much more closely replicated the way most people actually experienced skateboarding in the real world, whether on the boards themselves or watching their friends. They weren't taking part in races and competitions, they were out in the streets, creating their own fun, and Neversoft was embracing that aspect of the culture.

Embracing the culture is really the very core of what would ultimately make this game *Tony Hawk's Pro Skating* and turn it into a series to be reckoned with. Securing the name and branding of the sport's most prominent practitioner, of course, was also a major step in that journey – having Hawk himself regularly playtest new versions of the game through development helped maintain some authenticity.

The aspect of the culture that has probably been most heavily lauded over the years was the soundtrack. Its mix of punk, rock and hip-hop was not only a perfect reflection of the music that young skaters were blasting out of their boomboxes at parks and empty pools around North America, it was also one of the first great examples of a licensed soundtrack in the CD gaming era. It marked *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater* as not just a skateboarding simulation, but a fuller skateboarding experience that celebrated not

KEY FACTS

- The original build of *Pro Skater* that Tony Hawk played and that convinced him to sign onto the project actually had Bruce Willis (holding a gun) on the skateboard, since that was a character model from Neversoft's previous game, *Apocalypse*.

- Motion capture of Tony Hawk was used to help make the animations as authentic as possible, but before he signed up, the capture was actually done with members of the development team themselves.

just the skill and technique of the sport, but the fandom and lifestyle as well. And it's a soundtrack that, ahead of series such as Guitar Hero and Rock Band, was cited by the bands involved as a massive boost to their tour turnout and album sales.

Ultimately, however, we have to come back to the pure construction of the game and its mini-sandbox feel. The campaign mode of *Pro Skater* had you working under a time limit to collect tapes through completing challenges before the clock runs down. It invited exploration, but more importantly forced replays as you learnt the layout and worked out a route that allowed you to hit all of the key points. Collecting everything and unlocking tapes was essential to unlocking the next stage, but it was also fun in and of itself, which is something we've seen repeated on a much wider scale in games like *Crackdown* or more recently *Spider-Man*, in which small collectibles unlock upgrades and enhancements.

In the years that have since passed, the Tony Hawk's series has sadly declined, but it enjoyed fantastic success immediately following *Pro Skater* – it embraced its more extreme and bizarre side with *Underground*, and attempted to break into motion controls with *Ride*, which we would suggest lead to the series unfortunately losing its way. But *Pro Skater* set the bar for action sports experiences and limited open-world level design.

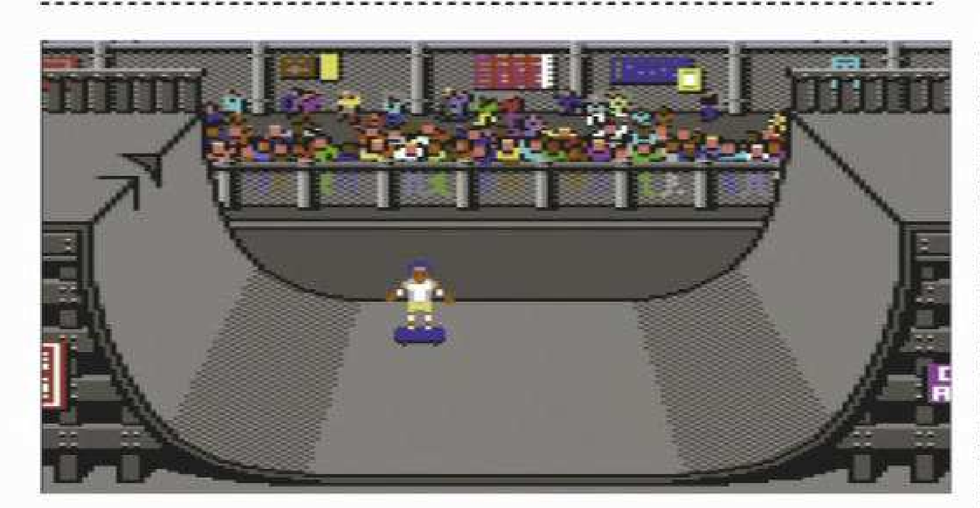
Following on from *Pro Skater*, we would see *Jet Set Radio* build up even bigger and crazier antics on roller-skates, while EA would eventually return to skateboarding with something closer to a sim experience with *Skate*. Also, of course, 3D open-world design would embrace the timed challenge and collectibles model that Neversoft's game made clear was a wildly successful way to structure an experience, expanding the structure out over bigger worlds with more complex systems and traveservsal mechanics. And, critically, it helped get a lot of people into skateboarding, into the culture around skateboarding and into the music around the scene.



GAME CHANGERS

THE EVOLUTION OF THE EXTREME SPORTS GAME

A QUICK LOOK AT HOW ACTION SPORTS TITLES HAVE EVOLVED OVER THE YEARS



SKATE OR DIE! (1987)

Released the same year as *California Games*, which touched on a number of classic action sports experiences, *Skate Or Die!* gave a much fuller take on the skating world with half-pipe, downhill and street challenges. It was also a great example of a game embracing that all-important skateboarding culture, with a gritty, graffiti-inspired art style that reflected the community's aesthetic tastes.



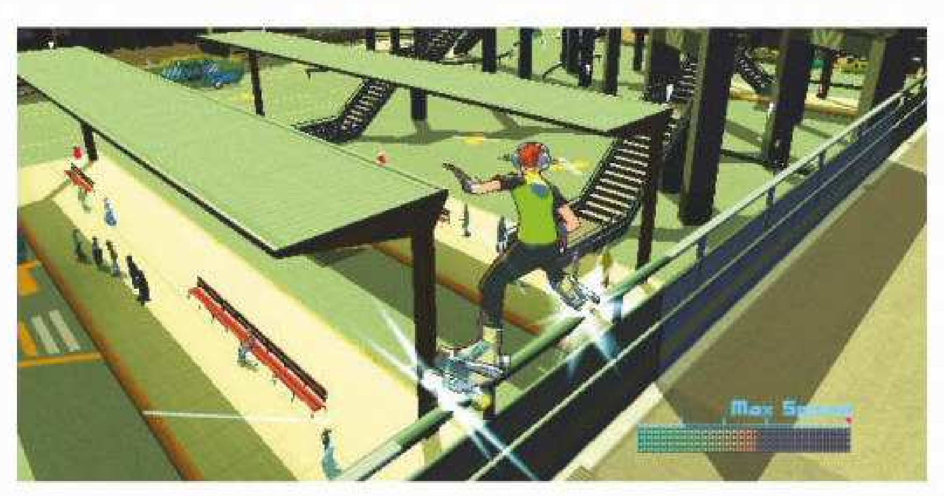
1080° SNOWBOARDING (1998)

A great example of how many action sports titles tried their hand at adapting to 3D graphics, *1080°* is a classic downhill experience, which makes perfect sense for a snowboarding game. Challenges varied from racing another player/AI to the finish line or completing points challenges on half-pipe courses and pulling off tricks against the clock. Well-mapped button inputs kept things simple, but perfecting your lines was a challenge.



DAVE MIRRA'S FREESTYLE BMX 2 (2001)

Showing the strength of the format established by *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater*, the Dave Mirra BMX series more or less mimicked the idea with open levels packed with half-pipes, jumps and rails to grind as you were challenged to hit score targets and find collectibles before moving on to the next stage. This sequel is about as good as the format gets, outside of Activision's title, with fluid animation, fun design and a bag full of tricks.



JET SET RADIO FUTURE (2002)

The cross-pollination of sports games and Jet Set Radio is hard to break down in terms of which influenced which the most, but what is clear is that between them they have helped set the standard for the kind of open-world, point-scoring and collectible-driven experiences in the years since. Grinding on rails, tagging walls and doing tricks are the order of the day, although *JSRF* is also more story driven than most of the other games here.



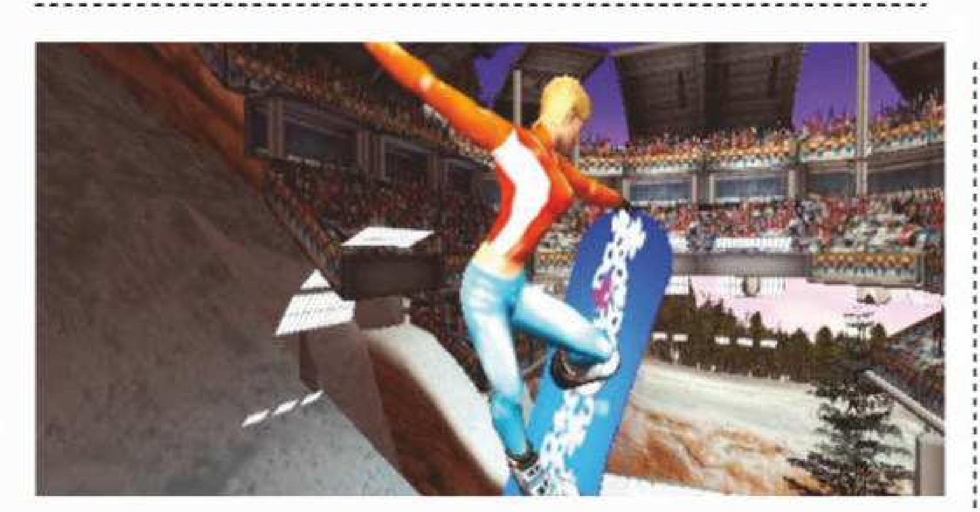
TONY HAWK'S PRO SKATER 3 (2001)

Still widely considered to be the most complete and concise execution of the Tony Hawk's game model, *Pro Skater 3* introduced the ability to revert, which meant that half-pipe tricks could be chained together using manuals to greatly extend the length of combo chains. It opened up all sorts of new possibilities for high score chasers. Plus, online functionality meant it was an early opportunity for players to connect and challenge each other on PS2, which was pretty significant.



SKATE 2 (2009)

EA's return to the world of skateboarding was a surprising one and its take on the format – mapping tricks to the right analogue stick in combination with grabs on the triggers and foot placement on the face buttons – seemed risky and complex. However, it turned out to be ingenious, giving Skate more of a simulation feel along with its relatively realistic look. *Skate 2* introduced a couple of simple upgrades, such as the ability to get off the board, plus embraced more of the crazier aspects of skate culture.



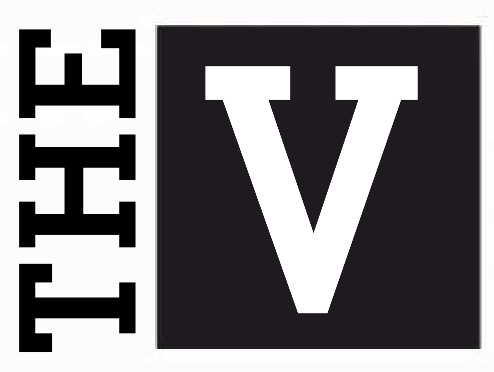
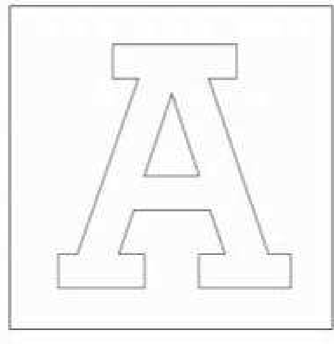
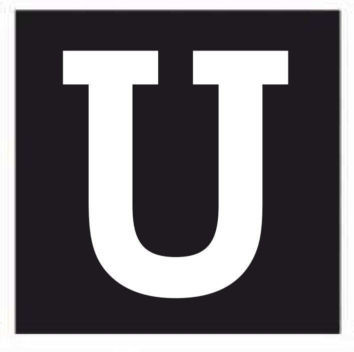
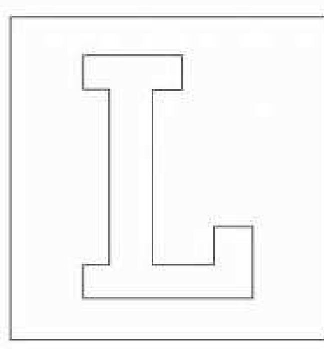
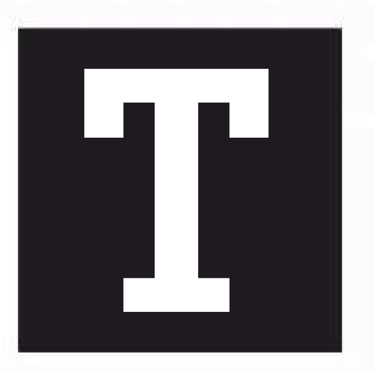
SSX TRICKY (2001)

Taking much of the downhill formula of something like *1080°* and turning it up to 11, SSX was all about big tricks, big personalities and big action. *Tricky* took that to a new level with its new Uber move, which charged up over time and allowed you to pull off several Uber tricks. Doing all of them in a run unlocked infinite boost for the rest of the level, making things even more insane. This is proper, high-octane sports action.



OLLIOLLI (2014)

Bringing things full circle, *OlliOlli* took skateboarding back to its 2D roots and linked it with some of the sensibilities of the endless runner genre to deliver a game that was both an interesting take on the sport and a real challenge that demanded more concentration than the 8- and 16-bit titles that might be considered its forebears. Like any great game in the action sports world, it respects skill above all else.

MS. PAC-MAN PLUG & PLAY TV GAME

MANUFACTURER: **MSI ENTERTAINMENT** PRICE: **£19.99**

In the age of the Classic Mini console rebirth, it might feel like the single game plug and play is a little behind the times and even more of a relic than the games it celebrates, but they have their place. As focused products often at considerably lower price points to the multi-game systems, they can be kinder to your pocket. They offer a chance to celebrate games that might otherwise be overlooked on headline-grabbing mini systems. And finally, they can be built to provide the optimum experience, particularly for arcade classics that might not be best represented by gamepads.

So enters MSI's latest plug and play, but alas, it doesn't manage to tick enough of the previous key proficiencies to be an unqualified recommendation for retro gaming fans. Firstly, we have the build of the unit itself, which just isn't great. The design and aesthetic is spot on with its arcade-perfect recreations of the original *Ms Pac-Man* art. And as suggested before, because this is focused on one game, it can offer an arcade stick, which in theory is great, except this stick is not particularly responsive. It has a pretty cheap feel to it, and when you consider Jakks had a *Ms Pac-Man* unit out not so long ago that can still be found around with a much better stick, that's a real issue for us.

But then there's the game itself, which is still as enjoyable as ever. Given that this is a plug-in stick, you might be expecting it to be the arcade version of the game, but from what we can tell it's actually the NES game instead. That may be a disappointment for you, depending on what kind of specific experience you were hoping for.

And we're coming from a 4K TV snob point of view here, but only having component cable inputs to play leaves this one even further behind the times. If you have a scart adapter or an old CRT kicking around then you'll be alright. It's just another frustration in the hardware design that detracts from what should be a fun retro gaming experience.

www.funstockretro.co.uk

VERDICT 6/10



We love the use of artwork on the casing of this device. It's straight from the original arcade machines, which we really appreciate.

If you're going to use this device on most TV sets then you're likely going to need a Scart adapter, like this one we've added from an old Xbox 360.

GAMING CLOTHING



WINNER WINNER

We're delighted to see new Gametee shirts, and these battle royale offerings are as cool as ever. Once again it's all original artwork from the Gametee team printed on quality shirts.

www.gametee.co.uk



PARTY BUS

From *PUBG* to *Fortnite*, we take to the skies before plunging into battle, and this homage to the journey is a very nice design. It's inspired by the layout of Shepard Fairey's famous Obey Giant art, which we like too.

www.gametee.co.uk



MARIO KART FIX-IT TEAM

We're really enjoying the way that Nintendo tees are branching out a little from the basic box art and character designs of the past into something a little more creative, like this *Mario Kart* homage with the Mario Bros as mechanics.

www.emp.co.uk

THEMED COLLECTION: WINTER WARMERS



YOSHI SCARF

PRICE: **£16.99**

He's been your protector and saviour more times than you can likely count, so let the wonderful Yoshi embrace you once more and keep you warm in the coldest of climbs with this lovely scarf rendition.

www.emp.co.uk



BUTTONS BEANIE

PRICE: **£12.99**

The subtle genius of the PlayStation button design is something that continues to strike us with each passing year. We'll admit to some scepticism around them when the PSone launched, but now they are iconic.

www.emp.co.uk



JIGGLYPUFF SCARF

PRICE: **£19.99**

Did you know Jigglypuff has become a fashion icon? It's true. You may have seen the cuddly pokémon adorn clothing at a recent international fashion show, for instance. You'll find this scarf far more affordable.

www.emp.co.uk



ZELDA POINTY BEANIE

PRICE: **£17.99**

There's a nice mix of cosplay style and practicality about this beanie that we really like. It's perfect, in fact, for all of those winter season gaming conventions. Seasonal Link cosplays are the new thing. We're calling it now.

www.emp.co.uk



NINTENDO CONTROLLER SCARF

PRICE: **£19.99**

We certainly noticed a trend towards Nintendo related imagery on scarves. Perhaps it's because the only thing more warming than knitted wool is the glow of childhood nostalgia? That might have something to do with it.

www.emp.co.uk



SUPER MARIO KART RAINBOW ROAD SCARF

PRICE: **£17.99**

This one is a little jazzier as scarves go, but we love the connection to Rainbow Road, one of gaming's most iconic and beloved racing courses. The finish and start line touches on the ends are a strong move.

www.gamerabilia.co.uk




THE WITCHER SCARF

PRICE: **£17.99**

This is a pretty plain scarf in many respects, but that's one of the reasons we rather like it. Geralt doesn't strike us as a man who would wear a flashy scarf; perhaps not even a striped one. This seems more his style.

www.gamerabilia.co.uk

MIPHA'S GRACE BEANIE

PRICE: **€29**

Much like how Mipha's spirit protected Link in his adventures through the wilds of Hyrule, so this beanie in her honour will protect you from the harsh temperatures of winter without having to eat a spicy stew or carry a flaming sword.

www.musterbrand.com



SPACE INVADERS SCARF

PRICE: **$24.99**

The iconography of *Space Invaders* is some of the most recognisable in the world of entertainment, and just so happens to work wonderfully in winter patterns. No surprise, then, that this scarf looks fantastic.

www.thinkgeek.com



MINECRAFT ENDERMAN BEANIE

PRICE: **$34.99**

We feel as if we don't see a great deal of Enderman material out in the world. Lots of Creepers, of course. A few pigs. Not so much the Enderman. And it's a cool design and colour combo. We fully endorse this beanie.

www.thinkgeek.com



ONE HEART DOWN SET

PRICE: **$34.99**

Coordination is the start of strong fashion choices, so why pick out a beanie and scarf on their own when you could combine them more effectively as one purchase? This set is nicely done.

www.thinkgeek.com

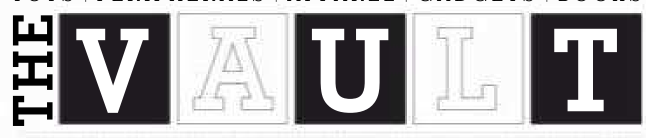


ATARI 2600 BEANIE

PRICE: **$19.99**

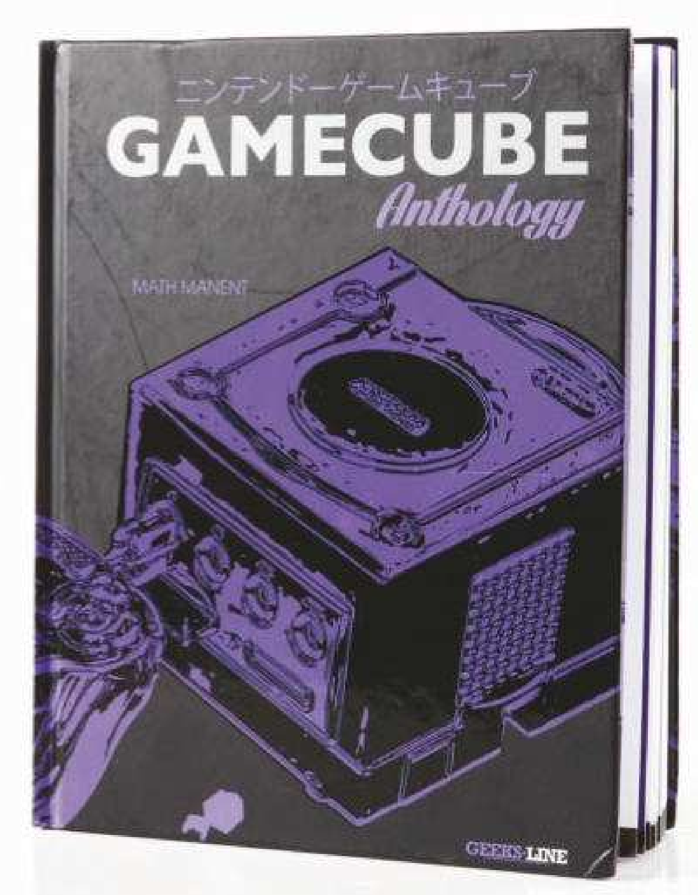
Based on the legendary design of the Atari 2600, we find the addition of prints of the buttons from the console rather amusing, but that strong splash of orange and the bars of black and grey really sell it for us.

www.thinkgeek.com



GAMECUBE ANTHOLOGY

PUBLISHER: **GEEKS LINE**



The Anthology titles from Geeks Line thus far have been uniformly excellent, so while the content and structure of this new edition should come as no surprise, neither should its overall quality. Having previously covered the PlayStation and Nintendo 64 consoles, this Gamecube retrospective is as comprehensive and widespread as it is detailed, and that's very impressive.

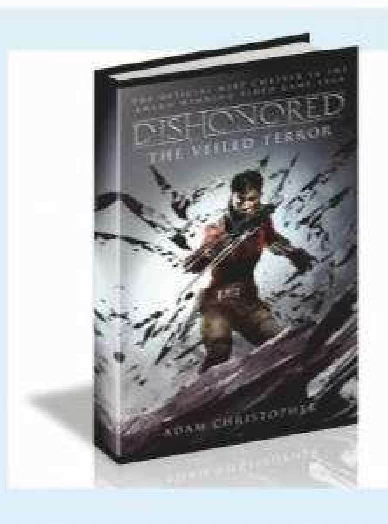
Chronicling the early days of the console, its awkward launch in the shadow of the 11 September terrorist attacks in 2001 and a sense that it needed to win back gamers after the stiff competition of Sony's console had drawn many gamers away, this book pulls no punches. As the text reflects, perhaps its greatest legacy is that it acted as the backbone and impetus for the Wii and the resurrection of Nintendo as the market leader in gaming.

As always, the breadth of hardware photography is impressive, the data far reaching and the games breakdown exhaustive. The write-ups vary in length, but every game features cover art and excellent-quality screens, special focus then applied to the biggest releases. A final section takes a look at the Gamecube's unreleased titles (which included *Perfect Dark Zero* and *Too Human*), which is a fun journey on any console, and includes images of the titles where they are available.

So, much like the last two books in this series, *Gamecube Anthology* ticks a lot of boxes for both keen collectors or Gamecube enthusiasts. It packs in the facts and fun back stories where they can be squeezed in, and is well worth checking out.

www.geeksline-publishing.com

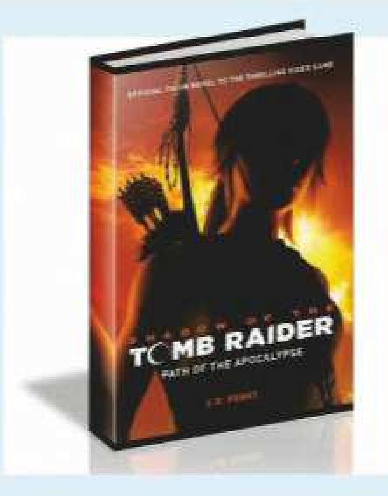




DISHONORED: THE VEILED TERROR

The actions of Billie Lurk in *Death Of The Outsider* have left the Void unbalanced, and now portals are appearing around the world that threaten to tear the fabric of reality apart. This new novel follows Lurk to a city torn in two by a rift in the hopes of finding out why this has happened and how it can be stopped.

www.forbiddenplanet.com



SHADOW OF THE TOMB RAIDER: PATH OF THE APOCALYPSE

This tie-in novel to Lara Croft's most recent game sees the legendary treasure hunter tracking down another ancient secret that Trinity wants to get its hands on for dastardly ends. This mission sends her to Colombia, with the evil organisation in hot pursuit.

www.forbiddenplanet.com



LIFE IS STRANGE: WELCOME TO BLACKWELL ACADEMY

This in-universe guide to Arcadia Bay's Blackwell Academy offers a closer look at the student life of the school with notes and doodles from many of its students, including everyone's favourites, Max and Chloe. This should be a nice extension of the universe for fans.

www.titanbooks.com



Future PLC Richmond House, 33 Richmond Hill, Bournemouth, Dorset, BH2 6EZ

Editorial
Editor **Jonathan Gordon**
jonathan.gordon@futurenet.com
01202 586213
Deputy Editor **Josh West**
Art Editor **Andy Salter**
Photographer **James Sheppard**
Brand Director **Tony Mott**
Senior Art Editor **Warren Brown**

Contributors
Vikki Blake, Anne-Marie Coyle, David Crookes, Mike Diver, Tim Empey, Sam Greer, Darran Jones, Rory Milne, Dom Reseigh-Lincoln, John Robertson, Nikole Robinson, Drew Sleep, Alan Wen, Andrew Westbrook, Steve Wright

Cover images
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Advertising
Media packs are available on request
Commercial Director **Clare Dove**
clare.dove@futurenet.com
Account Director **Kevin Stoddart**
kevin.stoddart@futurenet.com
01225 687455

International
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International Licensing Director **Matt Ellis**
matt.ellis@futurenet.com

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Head of subscriptions **Sharon Todd**

Circulation
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Production
Head of Production **Mark Constance**
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Head of Art & Design **Rodney Dive**

Printed by William Gibbons, 28 Planetary Road, Willenhall, WV13, 3XT

Distributed by Marketforce, 5 Churchill Place, Canary Wharf, London, E14 5HU www.marketforce.co.uk Tel: 0203 787 9060

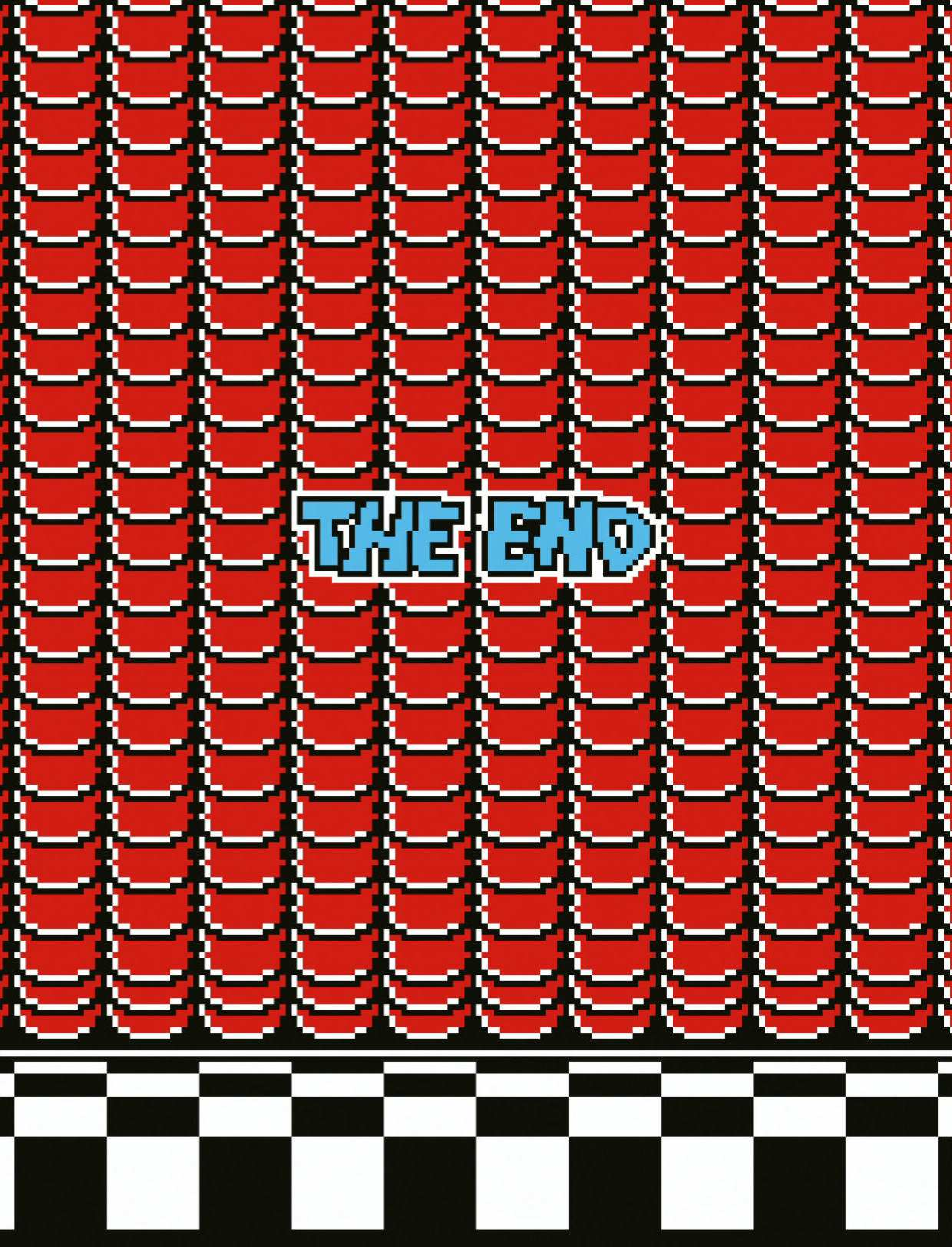
ISSN 1478-5889

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www.futureplc.com

Chief executive **Zillah Byng-Thorne**
Non-executive chairman **Richard Huntingford**
Chief financial officer **Penny Ladkin-Brand**
Tel +44 (0)1225 442 244


THE END